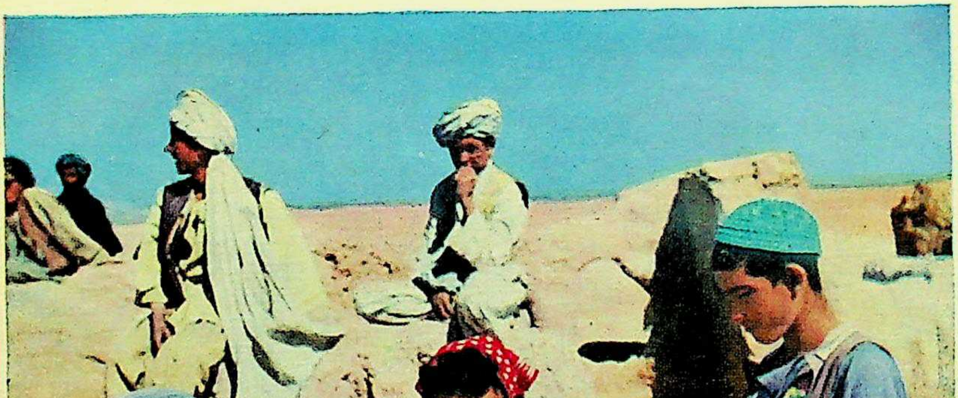
# TIME OFF TO DIG

## Archaeology and Adventure in Remote Afghanistan



SYLVIA MATHESON

*With a Foreword by Sir Mortimer Wheeler*

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## ARCHAEOLOGY AND ADVENTURE IN REMOTE AFGHANISTAN

by Sylvia Matheson

With a Foreword by Sir Mortimer Wheeler

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*For all those friends*
*of many nationalities who made*
*my Afghan journeys possible,*
*but especially for*
*Ginette, Jean-Marie and D.M.S.*

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# FOREWORD

THIS is a lively account of an archaeological excavation in a remote quarter of Afghanistan through the eyes of an enthusiastic amateur. In a sense it is inverted archaeology. All that the professional archaeologist ignores in his record is here chronicled with shameless gusto. Recurrent words are "excitement" and "thrill", terms not included in the austere vocabulary of the scientist. The wickedness of scorpions, of giant ants, of obnoxious little striped beetles; the wiles and winsomeness of Afghan labourers and their families; moonlit sentiment and wonder—"but I was no professional and nobody could stop me dreaming"—are the substance of the story. And why not? For those few who are concerned with the cultural setting of the broken mud buildings of Mundigak, there must be many hundreds who prefer such stuff as dreams are made on, particularly when dreamed in an exotic setting described with factual and convincing zest.

Mortimer Wheeler

## CHAPTER ONE

# *How it all Began*

I DON'T SUPPOSE that a professional archaeologist feels any surprise at finding himself several thousand miles from home, toiling under a blazing sun, digging out some ancient city whose venerable remains have been decently interred by wind and sand for thousands of years. On the other hand if you are a part-time archaeologist working for your living in an advertising agency in London, such a situation may call for an explanation.

It really began long ago on a hot day in 1946 when I sat scrabbling on the side of a long, sprawling mound that looked for all the world like an enormous tin loaf. I was raising a vast cloud of dust about my ears, veiling the horizon of stark, bare mountains and the sandy desert that shimmered below me in the heat haze. At the foot of the mound clustered the oasis of Nushki, headquarters of the Chagai district in what was then Baluchistan—now absorbed in West Pakistan. Above me on the summit of the mound rose the bungalow in which I was staying with the local Political Agent and his wife, the last European occupants of the P.A.'s bungalow, members of a now all-but vanished species.

Suddenly the still air was shattered by a wild cry; it startled me to such an extent that I slipped a good five yards down the side of the sandy mound and when I finally anchored myself and looked around fearfully, thinking that maybe a banded krait was about to attack, it was to see the stalwart Baluch servant who waited at table, gazing at me with a mixture of pity and horror.

His bulky turban slipping rakishly over one eye, his baggy white *salwar* trousers flapping round his ankles, he ran for the bungalow shouting "*Miss-Sahib diwani hai, Miss-Sahib diwani hai!*"

It was only when I saw my sand-hidden features and khaki hair in the mirror and was told that my search for traces of a prehistoric settlement had been made in the bungalow rubbish heap, that I appreciated just how mad the man must have thought me.

That chance visit to Nushki started me off on a hobby that was to bring me back again and again to this fascinating corner of the world. In a corner of the Political Agent's office I found a forty-year-old Baluchistan Gazetteer and in it the information that a particular hero of mine (on account of his travels in Turkestan) since my schooldays, had spent two days there in 1906. This man was Sir Aurel Stein, the famous archaeologist whom I had managed to meet in the British Museum in the early days of the Second World War. On examining pottery found when the top of the mound at Nushki was levelled in 1897 Sir Aurel had pronounced it to date from about 1,500 B.C., for this long hill in fact was a *dhamb*, a prehistoric artificial mound, on the sides of which were traces of squared-off walls sandwiched between layers of burnt debris.

So I found myself actually holding in my hands pieces of cooking pots which had been used by a woman who lived at least 3,000 years ago; inside the large vessel was a smaller one intact and containing chicken bones. Had the pot-user been a good cook I wondered? Why had she left her precious household goods, perfectly sound jars and bowls? Had the village been attacked suddenly, maybe during the night? Had she escaped with her family, this housewife of long ago? Or had she died in the village blaze as her predecessors probably had died when *her* tribe had fought the former villagers?

Speculations like these made archaeology live and vital. So far from forgetting my *dhamb*, I collected as many different types of potsherds as I could find without disturbing the surface—at that time I knew just enough not to spoil the site for future experts. There were beads too, agate, cornelian and turquoise, delicately pierced and shaped. Whose neck did they once encircle, whose eyes had sparkled at the sight of these primitive ornaments? I gathered them all and took them to Delhi to show to the then Director-General of Archaeology in India, Professor Mortimer Wheeler, now Sir Mortimer, whose erudition and caustic wit television has made popular. It was at his suggestion that I flew back to London to show my treasures to officials of the Institute of Archaeology and the British Museum.

I was asked to present my "collection"—such a grand title for a few potsherds and beads. That settled it for me. I spent the next year in determined full-time study of field archaeology and then, with enough knowledge to prevent me from doing too much damage, I sped back to Baluchistan to find a dozen or more unknown *dhambs*, collect pottery, figurines and beads.

There was still no chance of digging—for that, you need experts backed with money and a full-scale expedition.

As I travelled across the high, little-known desert, barren and stark, where proud tribesmen, sturdy and independent by nature, move as they please without passports, visas or other documents, across the Afghan frontier, my longing to push farther north increased daily. I had seen Afghanistan from the frontier town of Chaman, looking just as hot and dusty and full of emptiness as did Baluchistan. I had climbed jagged, shaley mountains in Baluchistan to gaze down on equally jagged, bare mountains in Afghanistan. I had even reached Kila Robat, a mud-brick fortress in the Beau Geste tradition at a spot where a high tangle of mountains formed the western frontier post; here I could sit in Baluchistan on the top of Koh-i-Malik-Siah, the Mountain of the Black King, putting one leg in Iran and the other in Afghanistan, a land which yet seemed beyond reach.

Why did I want to go there? What made it so irresistible?

Ever since I was about twelve years old, I had read all I could get hold of about Central Asia—Tibet, Turkestan, Sinkiang—for these territories fascinated and tantalized me. Afghanistan—that too was reputed to be difficult to visit—but it wasn't impossible; moreover it bordered those territories with the magic names. Across the Oxus in the north was Turkmenistan, Sinkiang lay to the east, the country of the Great Khan sprawled across most of Central Asia. The books I had read gave little idea of present-day Afghanistan. The best books had been written in the nineteenth century. Modern books seemed to consist only of the superficial impressions of groups of undergraduates rocketing across Afghanistan on a fourteen-day transit visa. I wanted something more than that.

In 1949 I was back in England, still without having set foot in Afghanistan. I tried hard to settle down. I spent another six months in full-time archaeological studies; then I had to find myself paid employment. I found myself writing copy for corn flakes in a large West-End advertising agency, far from the laughing, turbanned tribesmen of the Afghan frontier.

Not long after I had begun writing advertising copy I received a letter from the head of the French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan. Dr. Daniel Schlumberger was looking for a "body" for the coming season and through Sir Mortimer Wheeler he had heard of my passion for that part of the world. Would I like to join him? He would not be able to pay my fare, he added. By this time, my bank balance was looking sorry for itself and I couldn't raise the money to get even half-way there. Maybe, I suggested hopefully, I could come out later on?

More years passed. I spent occasional holidays on "digs" in Britain and a great deal more time gazing at the treetops in Berkeley Square, planning impossible expeditions across the Sahara with the Tuareg azailais or to Turkey, Peru and Indonesia, never imagining, as I pored over campaigns for cornflakes, that one day I should see diplomats in the Afghan capital frolicking about in masks cut out of breakfast-food packets!

Then in May, 1955, I saw in a copy of the *Illustrated London News* a headline: "Afghanistan of 5,000 years ago—the Deserted Mound of Mundigak". There were photographs of a great mound crowned with a long colonnade of mud-brick pillars that gave it the appearance of an acropolis. I could hardly wait to get paper in the typewriter to write to the author of the article, Monsieur Jean-Marie Casal, leader of the Prehistoric Section of the French Archaeological Delegation. Was the "dig" finished? Would there be another season? If there were, could I come and join them—say in 1956?

Away in Kabul on that same day, Jean-Marie Casal was writing to me. His letter invited me to join the expedition in two months' time!

"It's what you want to do, isn't it?" asked the Chairman of the advertising agency, looking from the photograph in the *Illustrated*

*London News* to the summer green of the trees in the square. "Then of course you must go—you'll never be happy unless you do!"

What a man to work for!

At that time Afghanistan and Pakistan were not very friendly—one day the frontier would be open, the next it would be closed; a few hot-heads on both sides predicted war. Since my passport described me as a journalist, wiseacres told me I would certainly be regarded as a spy, particularly if I went in the guise of an archaeologist. However in London the Afghan Ambassador welcomed me with coffee poured from an elegant silver pot, urged me to see as much of his country as possible, discussed archaeology with enthusiasm and searched for a couple of books he thought might be useful. A dear old lady I had never met, rang up to warn me to put brown paper on the floor of my tent at night, "then you'll hear the scorpions as they walk across it," and on no account to travel without a firearm to protect myself from those "fierce Pathans".

A gentleman with a passion for *purdah*, or rather for the concealing gowns worn by Muslim women observing *purdah* and which are called *bourkas* in Pakistan, *chadris* in Afghanistan, presented me with two made to his own design.

"You see, the ordinary *bourka* is not sufficiently concealing," he explained. "But my design fastens round the ankles and completely imprisons the hands. Now why don't you introduce this to Afghanistan? I'm sure it would be a great success!"

I arrived, at last, at London Airport bestrewn with cameras like a perambulating Christmas tree, and with a vast quantity of excess baggage.

Now all I had to do was to stop off in Paris to pick up some snake serum which the expedition had ordered from the Pasteur Institute. I was on my way.

## CHAPTER TWO

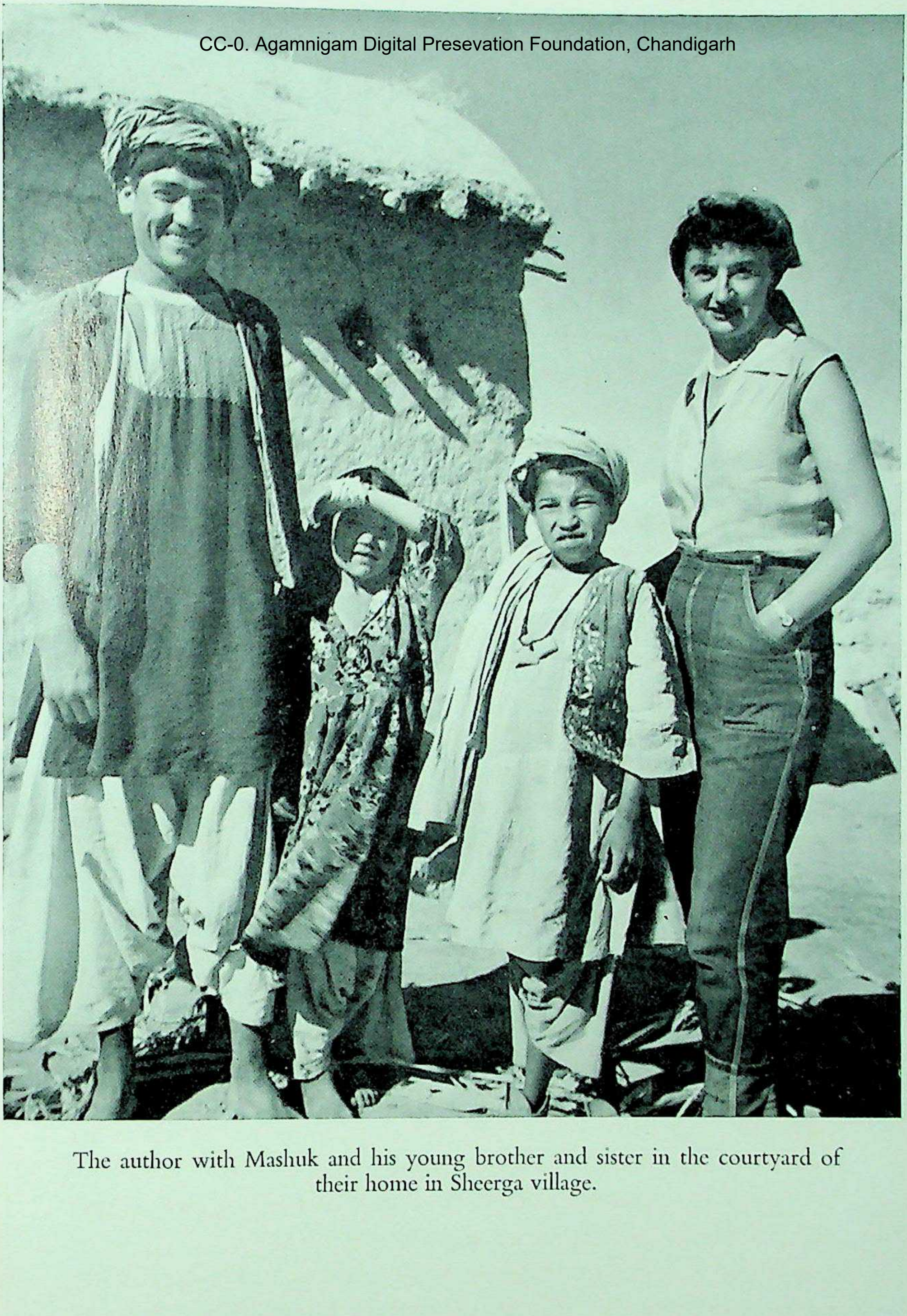
# *Alexander Passed this Way*

At half-past four in the morning, Teheran is cool, even in August. I squeezed into the airport bus with an assortment of fellow passengers, all bewildered. There were Arabs, tripping over their long brown cloaks, who adjusted Victorian bobble-fringed cloths arranged rakishly over one eye; lumpy Iranian matrons veiled sedately in dark blue *chaddars* with white spots, the current Teheran fashion; pretty Iranian girls in high heels and Dior dresses; a handsome, quiet Pakistani couple with a crowd of quiet children and servants; lastly, a goggle-eyed, chatty American couple escorted by noisy offspring disguised as cowboys and Indians. . . .

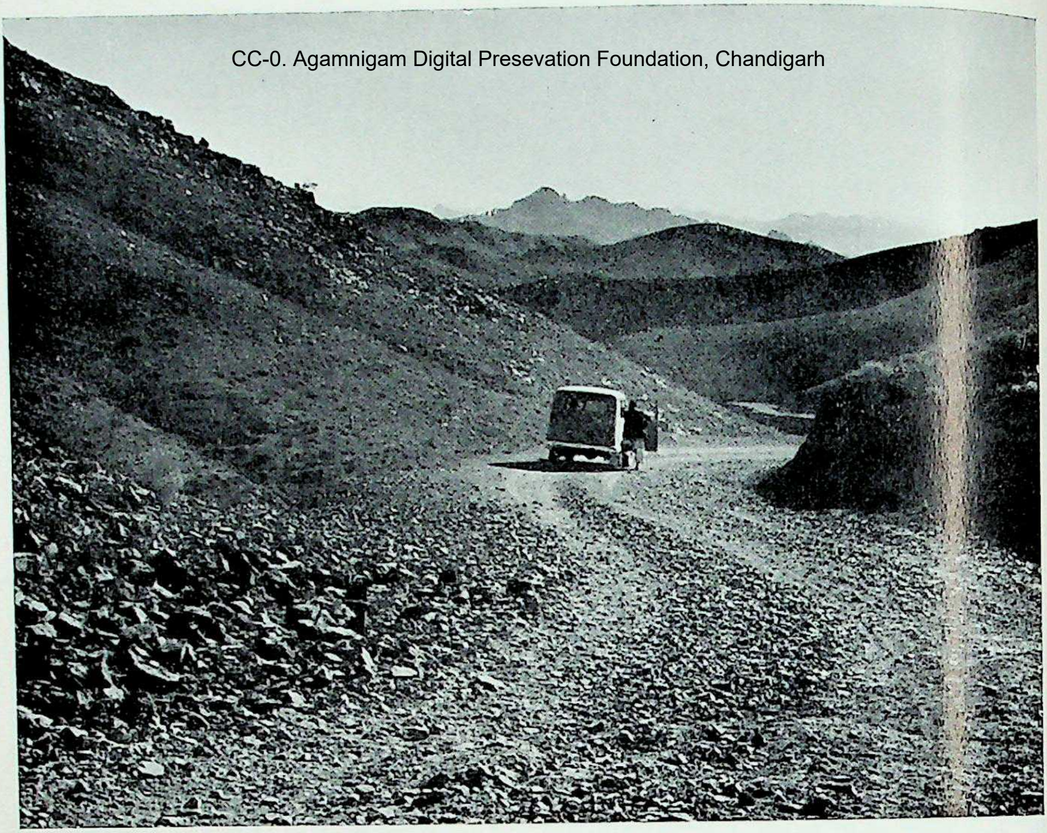
A slim young Australian with weary eyes entered and sank down into the seat beside me. Like most of the passengers it seemed he was bound for Karachi. As the aircraft laboriously heaved itself into the air, he swallowed a yellow pill and succumbed to slumber for the next three and a half hours.

Below us was desert. Spiny mountain ridges thrust up from the shimmering sand as we bumped and tossed our way through the turbulent August air. At times the sand mirrored the gentle swell of the sea; sometimes it resembled the fringes of surf left on the shore by a retreating tide; again it would be smooth and rippleless like a sheet of tawny blank paper; then it would resolve itself into huge waves breaking on to patches of mountain rock—it was always desert but never monotonous, never the same. Constantly the currents of hot air tossed us around until I looked with disbelief and envy at that tranquil, gently sleeping form beside me.

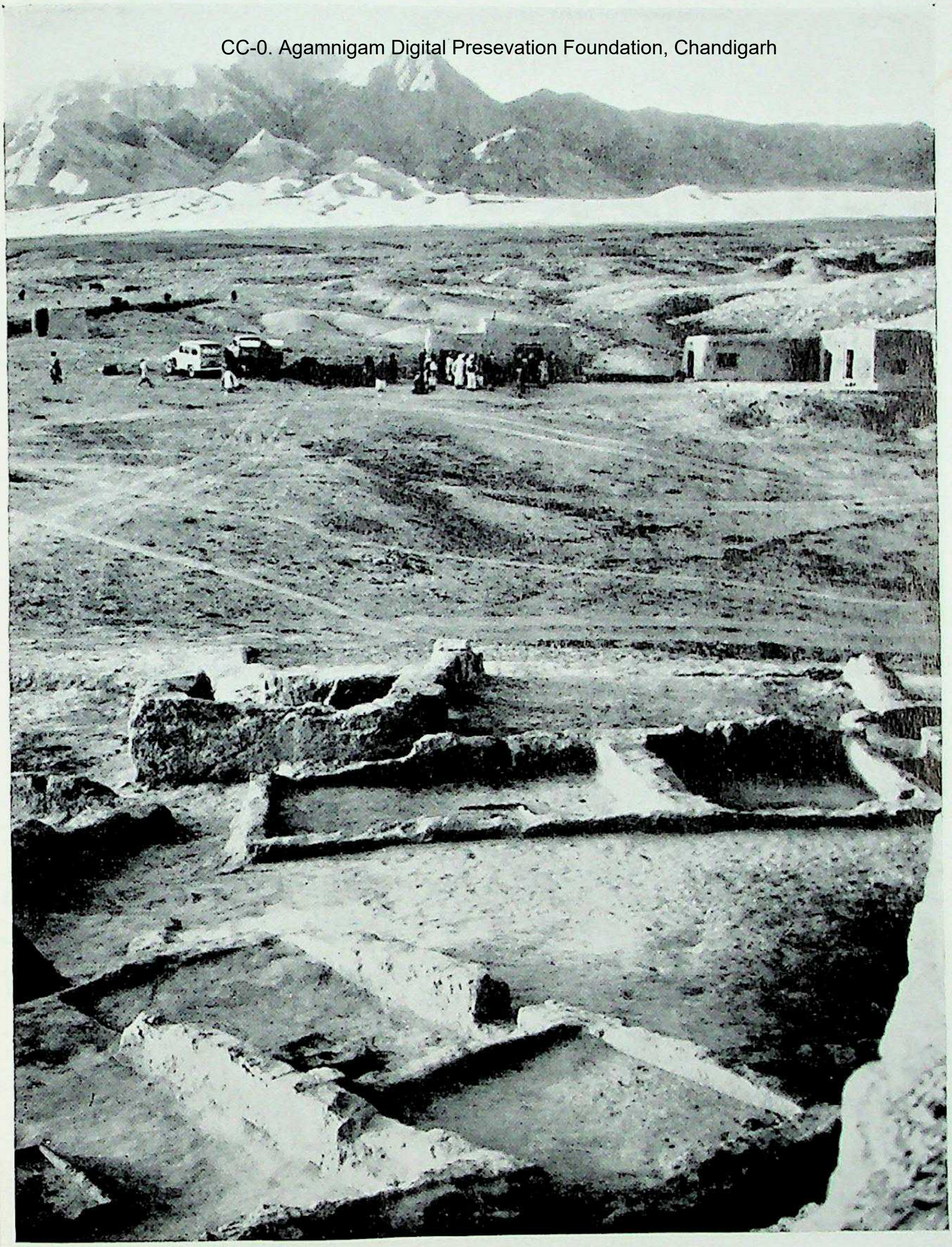
A ridge of mountains running north-south gradually grew more distinct and for the first time on the journey from London I began to feel the old excitement and the spell that Asia always casts on me.



The author with Mashuk and his young brother and sister in the courtyard of their home in Sheerga village.

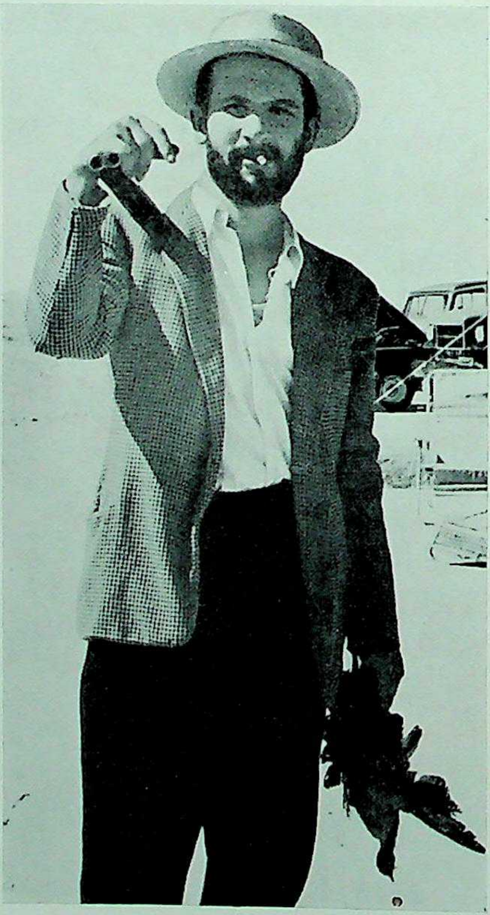


The rough road to Mundigak. *Above: Siah Sang* (Black Stone) Pass on the main road to Shah Maqsud and Mundigak. *Below:* Repairing a bridge not far from Kandahar which had been damaged by flood water. During the rainy season all travellers to Mundigak had to be prepared to make their own road repairs.



The camp at Mundigak, seen from the top of Mound A. The huts, our living quarters, are built of mud-pisé. In the foreground are the remains of the earliest prehistoric dwellings which had been buried under thirteen other habitation levels. The small oblongs with circles in the middle are the fireplaces. The photograph was taken on the last day of the dig when the workmen had gathered outside the mess hut to select their *baksheesh*.

*Right:* Jean-Marie Casal, leader of the Mundigak expedition, photographed on a Friday. For the Muslim labourers Friday corresponded to the Christian Sunday and was observed as a holiday for all of us. Jean-Marie took the opportunity to catch up with the developing of films he had taken.



*Left:* Jacques went out shooting every evening for our supper; this time the bag was poor, only two pigeons. That fine two-year-old beard was shaved off ceremoniously just before he returned to Paris to get married.

Those mountains I reckoned, must form the division between Persia —oh, well, Iran then, but Iran sounds so prosaic even though it is the official name—and Afghanistan.

We came down, circling over a piece of flat desert. Eight times we circled until we began to feel like a merry-go-round, before we were earthbound. This was Zahidan; all change and a two hours' wait.

Heat came with a rush as we stepped from the plane. A flock of white, fat-tailed sheep and dark, curly-haired goats guarded by a diminutive shepherd boy wandered hopefully towards a waiting Dakota in search of something more tasty than the prickly camel-thorn scrub.

The sheep settled in a patch of shade beneath the plane, and I joined the passengers squeezing into a tent furnished with a bench, half a dozen rickety chairs and a three-legged table. A large, earthenware jar stood at the entrance and the American lady was now peering into this apprehensively:

"But are you positively *sure* it's filtered and boiled? My Ambassador told me I should *never* drink anything unless I saw it boiled with my own two eyes. . . ." The tall tribesman standing by the jar smiled amiably, pushed back his long ringlets and bent down to drink with obvious relish, tipping the jar so that a few drops of the precious liquid spilled invitingly on the dusty floor. He turned large, shining eyes to the lady from Ohio. "*Khub ast, Khanum Sahib,*" he assured her. "It's all right!"

I could have hugged him. He was my first glimpse of Baluchistan after nearly seven years. Although his home might have been either in Persian Baluchistan or across the frontier in Pakistan, he was undoubtedly a Baluch. Through the open tent flaps I could see the towering, craggy, bare mountains of the Kachha Kuh range—one of those peaks was Koh-i-Malik-Siah where I had stood—goodness, was it nearly ten years ago?—longing to step into Afghanistan. Now I was nearly there, separated only by miles of desert where a hot wind stirred up the dust devils to dance erratically over the landscape.

These days one steps so confidently into jet planes that I had forgotten there could be places that only lighter aircraft can reach. Kabul, lying in a triangular gorge some six thousand feet above sea level and surrounded by steep mountains is one such place. Two of the ranges, the Asmai and the Sher Darwaza almost meet and the aircraft has to fly through the narrow gap between them.

I flew in the D.C.3 with one other passenger over Seistan and the Helmand Valley. Seistan is desert but once was fertile (watered by the great Helmand river and hundreds of miles of irrigation canals). Local tradition tells how Adam left Paradise (in Ceylon) searching for Eve and paused nowhere in the whole world until he reached Seistan where the swift-running, cool streams delighted his eye. He drank and fell asleep. When he awoke hungry, the Angel Gabriel appeared with pomegranate and date trees. Adam planted the trees which sprang up within a few moments and bore fruit to satisfy his hunger.

Another tradition tells how Noah's ark came to rest here when the flood waters began to subside and Noah released a pigeon that brought him news of dry land. In gratitude Noah prayed his thanks and said, "O God, make this land dear to every heart!" So Seistan was blessed with prosperity and fertility.

Even today the occasional years when the Helmand is in exceptionally high flood (and this may happen only once in centuries), are known as "the years of Noah". On the other hand, the area so optimistically coloured blue on the maps and named Lake Seistan or the Helmand Hamun is often no more than a dried-up depression.

Certainly this area had been a fertile garden for thousands of years. The Scythians or Sakas built their capital here about 127 B.C.; Solomon is supposed to have stayed in Seistan and the Zoroastrians say that the Soshyans, the Saviour of the World, will be born in Seistan. Even as recently as a thousand years ago when Mahsud, son of Mahmud of Ghazni, ruled over this area, poets sang of the gardens and orchards surrounding his palace at Lashkargah. "O King, human eye has not seen throughout the world a place more beautiful than this." Yet the rivalries of Mahsud's dynasty with the Ghaznavides and the Ghoris who conquered them, utterly destroyed the canals and the magnificent castles and palaces of Seistan. Before the country could recover from these catastrophes, Genghis Khan's devastating hordes had overrun it and, following the Mongolian's "scorched earth" policy, deliberately wiped out all remaining traces of civilization. The few streams and villages that escaped Genghis Khan's terror fell victim of Tamerlane.

With the canals and river silted up, vegetation shrivelled, life became insupportable: the land, no longer nourishing trees and plants, failed to attract rain-bearing clouds and the hot winds blew the sand until it covered the once-glorious cities and palaces; today only the fringes of the desert can support life and that entails a constant battle between man and nature: I remembered hearing about the Helmand Valley Scheme involving an American company that was building dams and canals to re-irrigate this desert.

We came down to land at Kandahar. Through the heat haze I could make out a string of weirdly formed mountains at the foot of which nestled a blur that must be the city. I glimpsed a little group of tribesmen squatting at the edge of the dusty airstrip, untidy, bulky turbans enveloping their heads like disorderly bundles of washing; the "tails" of the long turbans bound tightly across their faces kept out the worst of the sand. A surge of affection swept through me. Afghanistan seemed to be just like Baluchistan and, from what I could see of them, the tribesmen would prove to be very similar to their brothers across the border.

Only ten minutes in Kandahar to deliver and pick up mail; our American captain handed over a packet of books and magazines and in return was given an enormous basket of grapes. The door was slammed, the engines revved up and before the sand had settled from our landing we were stirring up another storm in the take-off.

Kandahar—Ghazni—Kabul; to me they were all magic names slightly unreal; names from an adventure story, from the leaves of some musty-smelling, leather-bound volume in a gloomy library. Alexander the Great was supposed to have built a city in these parts, the Alexandria of Arachosia. Somewhere below us, only thirty-three miles north-west of Kandahar, was a buried civilization farther removed in time from Alexander's city than we were today from Alexander himself. For Mundigak, the object of my journey, must have been a forgotten legend long before the Macedonian conqueror ever appeared on the scene.

We droned on over the hot, arid country, my admiration for General Roberts' famous march from Kabul to Kandahar increasing as I looked down—he and his men had walked over 334 miles of this hostile desert in twenty-three days. I had never been able to grasp the complicated web of politics that had led Britain to a series of invasions and withdrawals in Afghanistan over the past hundred years or so; something about the "Forward Policy" advocated by those who, fearing the invasion of India by Russia, wanted to establish British military outposts nearer the Russian frontier. I remembered having read of an old Afghan chieftain explaining the Afghan position to General Sir James Browne in the middle of the last century. "The Afghan nation," he had said, "is like a horse with ears turned in two directions, one ear for England, the other ear for Russia, fearful of both countries and listening to their every movement."

The British were only the last of a long series of invaders. Assyrians under Tiglath-Pilser II had occupied Kandahar seven centuries before Christ; two hundred years later had come Cyrus, pushing out the boundaries of his empire. He was followed by Darius of Persia; by Alexander the Great, who paused to establish cities over almost the whole of Afghanistan from Bactria in the north to Kandahar in the south; by Graeco-Bactrians, Parthians, Scythians, White Huns or Ephthalites, Kushans, Western Turks, Chinese, Sassanians, Arabs, the terrible Mongols, Uzbeks, Mughals (Baber, Humayun and Akbar). . . . Time and time again conquerors from the high tablelands of Central Asia had appeared on the banks of the Oxus, Afghanistan's northern boundary, and swept over, round and through the great mountain barrier of the Hindu Kush to force their way southward to the fertile plains of India.

Time and again the valley of the Indus and the rich plains beyond had proved an irresistible lure to ambitious conquerors from the west, from Greece, Macedonia and Persia, whose might and ruthlessness spurred them across great deserts and tangled mountains. There is even a legend that in A.D. 40 Saint Thomas the Apostle visited the Court of Gondopharnes who united the Kingdoms of Arachosia—now Kandahar Province—and Taxila, which lies between present-day Peshawar and Rawalpindi—and that the Apostle later followed Gondopharnes' conquest of the Kabul Valley in the far north. If there was any basis to the story, then I was looking down at country once trodden by the feet of one of Christ's closest companions. There was too the legend that Christ Himself, after rising from the grave, continued His ministry north-eastward, until He died in Kashmir; His tomb, "Isa's Grave", lies just outside Srinagar.

Below me, fanning out from the feet of the mountains to tiny, mud-walled villages, stretched long lines of perfect circles in dead straight rows, looking from this height like rows of pennies laid carefully on the sand. It was only because I had seen the Persian and Baluch methods of irrigation from the ground that I guessed these must be the vents of *karezes*, the underground channels that brought water from melting snow on the mountains to villages twenty or thirty miles away. Yet nowhere could I see signs of vegetation. It seemed impossible that life could be supported in such a barren land.

The wide valley was beginning to narrow as the mountains closed in on either side. That tangle of high mountainous country to the east must be the famous Hazarajat where Genghis Khan's son, Jagatai, or possibly his grandson Mangu, had settled some of his Mongolian tribes in the thirteenth century to guard the Afghan marches. Ever since then the Hazaras had kept their individuality, their sturdy independence, a constant source of irritation to the Amirs who ruled from Kabul, Kandahar and Ghazni. Today, out of an Afghan population estimated at some thirteen millions, there are about a million Hazaras. Scrupulously honest and hard-working, Hazaras were the only Afghans (apart from the nomadic gypsy Kuchhis) who allowed their womenfolk to go unveiled among strangers, and Hazara women are in great demand as domestic servants, especially in Kabul.

Presently, just ahead, I could see Ghazni, Mahmud's slender towers, domes and minars rising out of the seemingly flat landscape on my right; the new city, geometrically laid-out, was on my left. That brought me up with a jerk. Until now I had been so busy preparing to get there that I had never really given myself time to think of arriving. The dream had come true, the impossible dream of reaching Afghanistan and in less than a couple of hours I would be meeting the Casals. What would they be like? Would they be very serious, elderly, maybe a little prim and interested in nothing but archaeology? Would they approve of me? I wondered what kind of person they expected, a grimly efficient and earnest creature no doubt. It was up to me to make a good impression.

I had begun by leaving off nail varnish in Teheran. Hands that were going to grub around in sand obviously wouldn't wear varnish, even on holiday. Next I must change my sleeveless yellow blouse for a long-sleeved cotton shirt. That looked workmanlike and no-nonsense and was sufficiently covered-up to be inoffensive to strict Afghan Muslims whom I knew abhorred the sight of bare flesh, even an inch above wrists or ankles.

The aircraft appeared to have a sudden violent attack of indigestion as we bumped and rocked over the narrowing valley; bare, moonlike mountains closed around and above us until I was clutching the arms of my seat: I desperately tightened my safety-belt. Rocky grey mountains seemed to scrape our very wingtips; the aircraft jerked violently from side to side and up and down, like a marionnette on a string. We flew through a seemingly shrinking passage towards a towering mass of rock that blocked out the very sky itself.

I thought of the pilot's careless comment on the inaugural Kabul-Kandahar flight three months previously—"She crashed right into the side of the mountain," he had told me—"no survivors!"

Suddenly a twist in the gorge revealed the heavens once again; we were through the mountains without a scratch, out into the Kabul valley lying green below us. Trees and gardens came into view; a streak of river showed with the city clustered in a great "U" round a spur of the rocky mountains, the new city on one side, the old on the opposite bank.

We came in to land on a great dusty field with a couple of small planes already nicely tucked away in one corner. I put on my scarlet straw hat, picked up cameras, typewriter, dispatch case and raincoat, clutched my passport in my teeth, lumbered down the steps and out into the heat of Kabul airfield.

A wire fence divided us from a cluster of one-storey buildings; a group of Europeans leaning over the fence was calling greetings in

German. A little apart stood a tall, good-looking man in his late forties. By his side a petite, attractive woman with curly brown hair, intensely grey-blue eyes and a straight little nose. Her gay summer dress was sleeveless and her bare feet were thrust into white sandals.

Never had I felt so oafish, and the warmth and charm of the Casals' welcome never once hinted at what I learnt only months later, that they had been misinformed of the time of my arrival and for the last four hours had been waiting in the heat and dust of the airfield with not even a glass of water to quench their thirst. There was a twinkle in the grey eyes of Monsieur Casal as I stretched out my grubby hand in greeting and I saw that Madame Casal's small fingernails were adorned with bright scarlet varnish.

It began to look as though life in Afghanistan was going to be very different from my preconceived ideas!

## CHAPTER THREE

# *Introduction to Kabul*

THE FIRST THING I discovered was that for years I had been mispronouncing the name of this far-away mountain capital: you pronounce it "CAWbul" or sometimes "CARbul" but never "KaBOOL".

Now, as I climbed into the dusty station wagon between tiny Genevieve Casal and her tall, stoop-shouldered husband, I looked for the famous covered bazaars, the high city walls, colourful tribesmen and camel caravans that the very name of Kabul conjures up. But the road from the airport was long and straight and dusty; apart from one small cluster of mud-coloured houses there was no sign of life until we turned at a cross roads and began to pass modern bungalows surrounded by walled gardens. We passed half a dozen wayside fruit vendors before, after bumping along a particularly rutted track, we pulled up outside a wooden gateway set into a high wall surrounding one of the westernized bungalows. A café-au-lait dog with enchantingly long silky ears of pale cream and a feathery creamy-tan tail leapt over the wall to greet us.

Monsieur Casal stooped to caress the lovely Afghan hound. "Meet so important a member of our expedition," he introduced us solemnly. "L'Idiot of course comes with us to Mundigak."

Later, sipping tea in the coolness of the little garden with its cluster of ripening grapes hanging from the vine-covered pergolas, I learnt that our departure for the dig was delayed. "Now is the time of mourning—Mohurram. Soon it finishes but all the shops and Government offices have been closed for Mohurram. Next there come ten days of Jaishun, the celebrations of Afghan independence," Jean-Marie Casal was explaining—his English was fluent, though his accent could be sliced with a knife. "For Jaishun the shops and the offices are also closed and we have many permits to get before we can leave, and all our stores to buy."

He sighed as he stretched out his long legs and rumpled his short-cropped, greying hair.

Softly, with a calmness that was to typify her gift for soothing away troubles, Genevieve—or Ginette as everyone called her—broke in.

"But now it is too hot, Jean-Marie; we could not work in this heat; remember at Mundigak it is much more low than here and much, much hotter—and besides," she added with finality, "I am not yet all prepared for leaving."

So for the next two weeks there was nothing I could do but enjoy myself. I spent my days wandering around the old city as much as I could, despite my lack of both the Persian language and a guide. The Casals were busy packing and I was unable to find a street map; as I soon discovered, very few streets were named. Your house had a number, that was all, and if you went visiting, your host had to draw a little sketch map for you and hope that you could see your way by starlight if it was an evening party. As far as the hospitable but wary Afghans were concerned, any entertainment of Europeans had always to be under cover of darkness and promises of secrecy. Friendship with foreigners was regarded as rendering an Afghan politically unreliable no matter how loyal to the existing government he might be.

So I would stumble home in the dark through the unmade roads where open *djuis*, channels used for sewage, drainage, and irrigation alike, ran alongside the houses and made sudden right-angle turns to cut across the road itself.

"They say you are not a Kabuli until you have fallen in the *djui*," Jean-Marie comforted me as he helped me out of a wide and deep ditch one night.

By way of contrast I swam in the cool waters of the pool set in the King's vineyards at Karez-i-Mir, on the road to the Oxus, or shared picnics in narrow hidden valleys on the edge of the Hazarajat country where groves of slender silver birch trees shaded unexpected patches of emerald grass edging bubbling mountain streams. Afghanistan is a breath-takingly beautiful country—in places austere and aloof, in others jewel-sharp and sparkling, or soft as a woman in love. Only in the cities did I feel constraint. Now, looking back, it seems as though I must have imagined that taut atmosphere of suspicion and intrigue. Yet there were the people you did not acknowledge if you met on the street in daylight, however friendly they had been under cover of darkness; there were warnings that so-and-so was "not safe" to be seen with; all the time there was talk that permits might be withheld . . . was it my imagination or did I really breathe more freely outside the city walls?

All my reactionary instincts were roused at the sight of Afghans in European dress. Where were the wild-eyed, fierce tribesmen clutching daggers and guns, that I'd always imagined part and parcel of Kabul? Certainly they were not here in the new suburb of Shahr-i-Nau. Those who did wear the baggy purtak trousers and embroidered waistcoats and floppy turbans were mild-eyed, ingratiating shopkeepers, presiding cross-legged over open-fronted stalls offering American detergents at the equivalent of a pound sterling a packet—I had already bought two before this dawned on me. Small tins of instant coffee cost the same, but the piles of ripe melons, golden oranges that were known as "Malta", rosy pomegranates and green and black grapes you could buy for a few pence.

Occasionally I would meet a group of Afghan women completely hidden in their silk *chadris*—completely, that is, but for a shapely foot in a high-heeled shoe and nylon stocking! This Afghan version of the *bourka* is much gayer, much more feminine than its equivalent in India and Pakistan. There is variety of colour—jade green, old rose, palest blue, gold, sapphire, and the garment is gathered in a multitude of small pleats to fall from a richly embroidered, close-fitting cap. In front, the veil, trimmed with fine embroidery, falls to the waist; the open edges of the garment are held together by the wearer, leaving opportunity for the wind to reveal a charming summer dress, or, in one case, the "little black suit" beloved of chic women in the West.

One day I drove to Jedai Maiwand, till recently the entrance to Kabul's traditional covered bazaars. Now it was a wide strip of treeless, desolate, half-finished road with a monument at one end dedicated to the "Unknown Afghan Warrior"—"You see, this will be the Champs-Élysées of Kabul," explained my Afghan companion. The town-planning authorities had diligently pulled down the old markets, widened the street and were erecting flamboyant new buildings several stories high, faced with vivid pink, blue, purple, yellow and green tiles. Half-way down the Jedai Maiwand we came to a gap in the new buildings and found them to be only a façade; something of the old bazaar still remained hidden behind them.

Here the mid-day sun managed to penetrate in only a few reluctant shafts of light thrusting between the overhanging first-floor rooms of the ancient mud-brick houses. Tiny open-fronted shops were raised a foot or two off the dusty lanes; their proprietors, squatting in the midst of their wares, displayed all kinds of intriguing goods. Like flowers blossoming in the dim recesses of the little shops were shelves full of Gardner ware. These delicate rose, deep blue and rarer, green teapots and handleless cups were made by an Englishman called Gardner who, in 1758, at the invitation of the Tsar of Russia, had set up a factory at Verbilki. A branch of this factory was still functioning in Russia as late as the end of the nineteenth century. Gardner's trademark was his name in Russian characters. Occasionally his porcelain was imitated by Persians who added the name of Gardner in Persian characters. I was intrigued to learn on my return to London six months later that some of this ware had been fetching high prices at Christie's.

Today much of the so-called Gardner ware found in Afghan shops is imitation, made in Japan. So the genuine article has risen steeply in price during the last few years, especially since it became bazaar gossip that Americans attached to the United Nations Organization and other projects in Afghanistan were taking an interest in china.

We moved on to the street of the silversmiths. Here there was nothing but jewellers' shops, some mere cubby holes yet often containing several thousand pounds' worth of cash and jewels. There were glass cases displaying silver filigree work, heavy and clumsy, set with real or imitation jewels. Overhead, stretched on lines criss-crossing the lanes, freshly-dyed *chadris*, looking like grotesque ghosts of red, green and blue, hung drying in the sun; they were animated by occasional gusts of wind from the encircling mountains. Here and there, beneath the dancing shadows, a little group of live "ghosts" clustered over a pair of bell-like earrings, or bargained for some gaily-patterned cloth, the face-veils of the *chadris* lifted cautiously until only a pair of grey or brown eyes peeped out. Still more often a pair of hands would emerge from the covering *chadri* to pull samples of the shop-keepers' wares beneath the concealing garments where they could be examined more closely.

In the shoe bazaar, lane after twisty lane was lined with minute stalls selling only footwear. There were rubber galoshes from Russia, golden evening sandals of European pattern, delicate, curly-toed Persian slippers smothered in embroidery, Indian *chapals* and—just what I was looking for—heavy Pathan *jhutties* with soles an inch thick, the toes extended to curl over the instep; strips of bright green leather lined the curl and the high, pointed back of the heel; there was gold stitching to outline the shape that was graceful for all the sturdiness. I stopped to try the *jhutties* on and the shady lane became dark as night while passers-by lingered, fascinated, to watch my efforts.

Here at last was the Kabul of my imagination; apart from ourselves there was not a soul in European dress.

The shoes showed no difference in shape between left and right feet—the problem was to find two shoes that matched and into which I could get my feet. After searching around among the haphazard collection, I did find two that made a pair. They happened to be light tan in colour; I preferred a darker brown. Within minutes a small boy brought a saucer of stain, the cobbler rubbed it into the shoes and polished them until the gold stitching glowed against the coffee-coloured background. Triumphantly I bore them away and the crowd melted into the shadows as mysteriously as it had gathered.

We were nearly ready to leave. As soon as the Government offices were opened again after the public holidays, I was taken to get my permits, to register with the police, to extend my visa for six months and to meet the then Director of Archaeology, Keeper of the Kabul Museum, and Director of Historical Publications, all three functions being at that time united in the person of Dr. Khozad, an amiable, grey-haired Afghan in an immaculate grey suit.

It was arranged that the Museum, closed during Mohurrum and Jaishun, would be opened for me next day. So I set off with Monsieur Casal to visit one of the coldest museums in the world in a place where the temperature outside was 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Warned by the Casals, I took a jacket with me. We drove along five miles of the best tarmac road in all Afghanistan. It leads from the old city to Dar-il-Amoon, the magnificent new administrative capital begun by ex-king Amanullah in the 1920s. It was Amanullah's impetuous attempts to introduce immediate and drastic reforms after his visit to Europe in 1928 that had led to his people's revolt and to his own abdication and exile. He had, for instance, ordered the complete emancipation of women who hitherto had led lives most strictly secluded; they were ordered to cut off their long hair (this in a country where short-haired women are traditionally regarded as prostitutes!) and to discard the *chadri*. Well-born girls were sent to Europe for their education. Tribesmen were forbidden entry to the capital unless they wore European clothes. These and similar reforms outraged tradition and religious teaching, so Amanullah's new capital was never completed and, like the single-track railway he built to link the old and new capitals, it never functioned. The railway track incidentally is the only one in the whole of Afghanistan; the engines ordered for it are still rusting away without ever having been used.

Now the vast, Versailles-like buildings of Dar-il-Amoon provide offices for the Afghan Secretariat and opposite them is the two-storey Museum where, well wrapped up, I pored over what must be the finest collection of Graeco-Buddhist ivories in the world. There was at that moment little or nothing of prehistoric Afghanistan in the Museum, but this was a gap that would be filled by the work at Mundigak.

I had met the rest of the team at a farewell party given by Dr. Daniel Schlumberger, head of the French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan. There I was introduced to a sprightly young man with curly black hair and a lively smile. "Achour, he comes from Algiers and is travelling round the world," Dr. Schlumberger explained. "He came to us a year ago and will be going with you to Mundigak."

Achour, busily pouring out drinks, handed the tray to a companion and bowed gracefully towards me. "Enchanté," he greeted, with a marked Arab accent.

The young man who now held the tray of glasses was trying to edge his way unobtrusively round the back of the crowd, but my host ambushed him neatly.

"Ah, Jacques, bring us a drink and I want you to meet your colleague, Mademoiselle Matheson—Jacques Dumarçay. He will be your architect at Mundigak."

Jacques, his chin fringed with a beard that seemed unable to decide just where and how long it was growing, shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, murmuring polite inaudibilities.

Next to appear was a slender young Afghan who was, if anything, even more shy than Jacques.

"Ebrahim works at the Museum but he will be going to Mundigak for the first time this season, to gain experience on a prehistoric site."

Behind us Monsieur Casal had appeared suddenly. A smile illuminated his brown face, a heart-warming smile that was to put fresh encouragement into us on many a dusty, weary day in the desert.

"Yes, we are indeed lucky," he said. "Until now Ebrahim has always worked with Dr. Schlumberger on Bactrian or Buddhist sites in the north, but at last we have a chance to have him with us."

Ebrahim smiled shyly, responding in German. We were going to be a multi-lingual team, it seemed, for Ebrahim was Persian-speaking; he knew no French and very little English.

"It is possible that we have another member with us for a few weeks," added Monsieur Casal. "He is a Belgian historian, Maricq. He has never been with us before either, but this season I want all the help we can find and I am hoping he will come."

I should perhaps explain that there is a certain snobbism, a class-distinction if you will, among archaeologists; those who specialize in pre-history for instance, that is, civilizations of which we have no written records, rarely find themselves passionately interested in historical sites such as Roman, Greek or Bactrian and, of course, the same thing applies in reverse. Archaeologists tend to specialize. However, the tall, gangling Belgian with flaming red hair and an earnest, short-sighted gaze was after all persuaded to leave his beloved Bactrians and Zoroastrians to join the prehistorians for a week or two.

As if to set the seal on our expedition, a young Afghan nobleman with an expression usually rather lugubrious, promised to come to visit us at Mundigak.

"My uncle, he is a very old man now, but he is the Chief of the Barakzai tribe," he told us—the Barakzais have supplied the rulers of Afghanistan ever since 1826—"he lives in Kandahar and he will arrange for you to have horses to ride. And I too will come with some of my tribe and we will ride together along the old caravan road in the valley of the Hari-Rud. We can ride to Herat," he went on, carried away by his own enthusiasm, "yes, I have just heard of someone coming from Herat through the mountains of Zamindwar; they are wild, very wild men there. If they like your coat they will kill you to take it; I think I would like very much to ride through that country," he laughed. "But not by myself; with my guns and my tribe."

We all thought this a wonderful idea. "At the end of the dig, in November," urged Monsieur Casal. "If you come then, we can all go with you."

Full of anticipation, we hurried home to pack.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# *The Road to Kandahar*

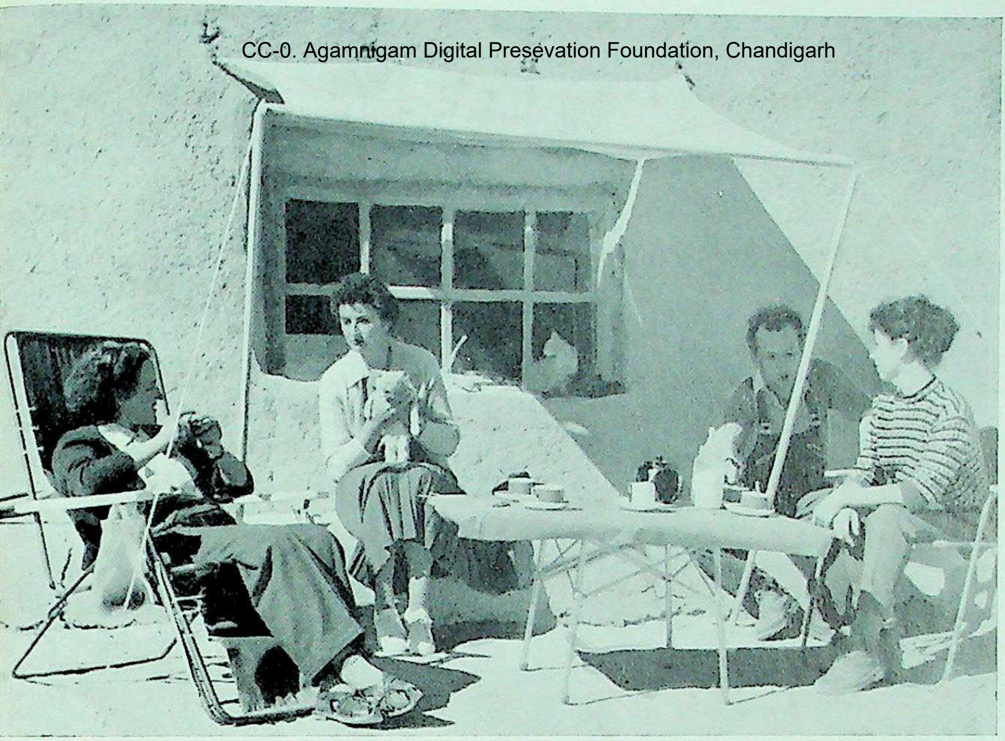
THE TIME HAD come for us to leave Kabul.

On the last Sunday morning we had gone to Mass at the little Roman Catholic chapel attached to the Iranian Embassy. I had enquired about a Protestant church but it appeared that only the one little chapel was permitted in the whole country. Afghanistan is one of the few remaining countries in the world to refuse admission to Christian missionaries.

That afternoon an open lorry was driven into the garden of the Casals' house. Jacques and Achour, with Hassan, the bearer, Hashim, our young Romeo of a houseboy and the gardener tried to make order out of the confusion of tin trunks, wooden chests, shapeless bedding rolls, levelling poles, collapsible chairs and an enormous stove complete with yards of blackened pipe. At last all had been stowed away, with the bedding on top to provide a soft perch for those who were riding outside.

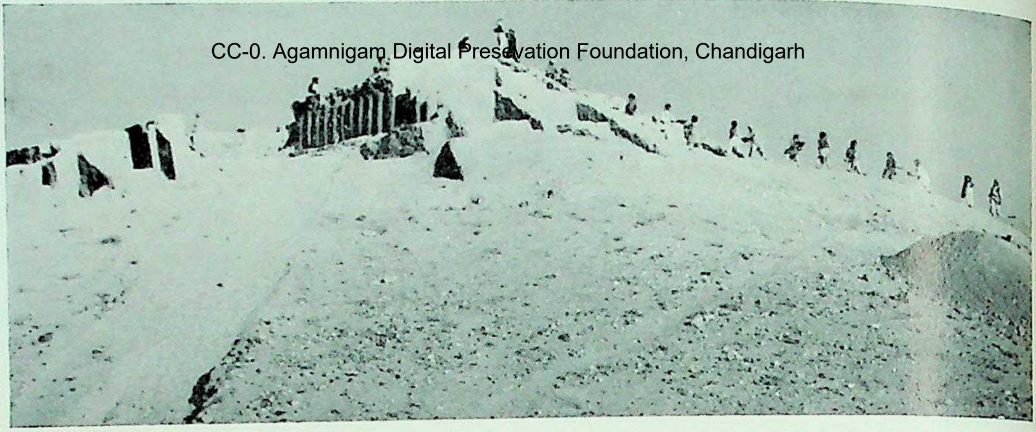
I lazily rose at four-thirty next morning to see a blaze of candle-light (in 1955 Kabul's electricity functioned with great hesitation for only a few hours daily) and the whole team gathered busily at the house. Ginette was on her knees before three large open suitcases. "I am just packing," she explained, holding up a stump of candle as she searched for the companion to the sandal in her hand. Jean-Marie was collecting books from his office, and Hashim was being directed by both at once to carry the pictures for Ginette's architectural exhibition, till now hung on every spare inch of wall-space in the house and outbuildings, gather the rolls of plans, pack unwanted books and take armfuls of clothes to the big wardrobe in my room across the garden.

It was nearly eight that morning when Hassan and the cook



*Above:* We all looked forward to our day off on Fridays. In this photograph, taken on such an occasion, Ginette is on the left knitting; the author nurses Kitten Number One and Number Two is on the window ledge; on the right are Jacques and his bride Jacqueline.

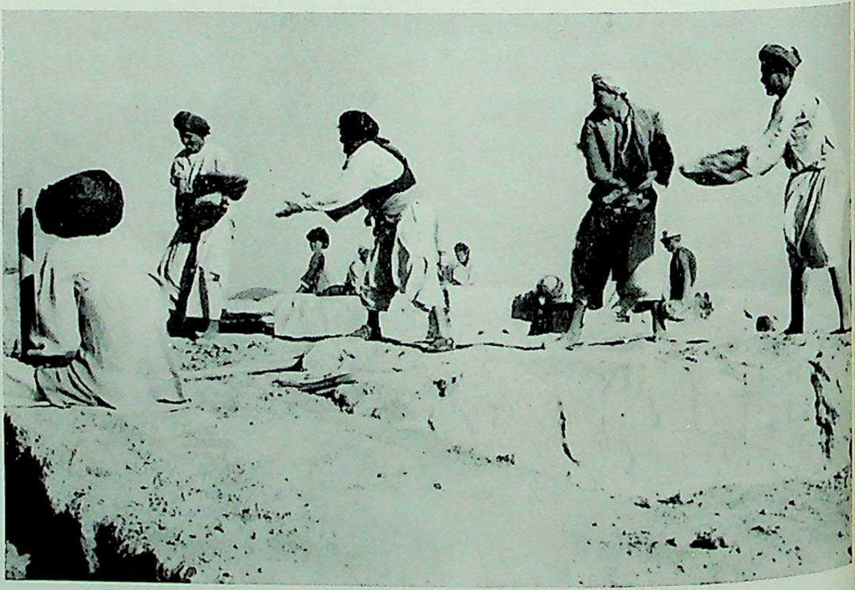
*Right:* In the evenings L'Idiot, the Afghan hound, occupied most of the divan while Ginette sewed together strips of Kuchhi embroidery.



*Above:* A distant view of work in progress on Mound A. The mud-brick colonnade had been buried beneath thirty feet of sand and every particle was removed by hand.

*Left:* The *kalang-wallah* (pick man) had to be careful and skilled if buried objects were not to be damaged during excavation.

*Below:* A close-up of *tukri-wallahs* (basket men) at work. At first each man carried his load to the dump, but the lazy ones loitered; passing the filled baskets from hand to hand proved a much quicker method.



climbed into the front of the lorry beside "Mad" Amin the driver, whose first name was just a local variation of Mahomed; Hashim, consciously beautiful in an enormous white silk turban, was pushed and heaved up top to wedge himself precariously among the pots and pans and bedding rolls. Into the back of the station wagon went our more personal belongings; typewriters, cameras, guns, gramophone records (Achour's contribution these) the black tin box with all the money—the whole lot was covered with rugs to make a bed for L'Idiot. We were all in working clothes now, Ginette's diminutive figure in red slacks and blue shirt, with a scarf over her hair, Achour with his camera round his neck and a dazzling white solar topee on his head—"a real bon marché," he explained, not at all put out by our disrespectful laughter.

No one could accuse Jacques of dressing up. His battered straw hat was a museum piece, his shirt, already torn and frayed, possessed but one button, and his grey flannel trousers were barely decent.

"They have ten years," grinned Jacques proudly.

Jean-Marie, looking strangely "pukka-sahib" in snowy shirt and shorts, was driving us. Somehow I found a place for my blue-jeaned legs and two cameras among the gears and brakes, and finally Maricq arranged his lengthy person next to me. Not so much as a pocket handkerchief could have been squeezed in now. It was just as well that Ebrahim, our Afghan colleague, had gone on ahead some days before.

It was a lovely sparkling morning, misty and full of promise. L'Idiot bounced up and down at the back but we were too tightly jammed to bounce at all. The streets of Kabul were deserted, even at this hour, for Kabul nights are long and chilly and Kabulis are late risers. Old houses were scattered up the hillside by the river, their windowless walls looking rather sinister. Lethargic movements showed on their flat roofs, where small patches of colour gleamed among the khaki mud walls as striped blankets and floral quilts were flung on the parapets to air in the sun.

Along the river itself the banks began to assume the appearance of a flower garden as muffled merchants spread their colourful wares, the brightly-striped cotton rugs from Hazarajat which are called *glams* and subtle-patterned, deep-piled carpets from Daulatabad, Herat, Maimana and Badakhshan.

We motored past the grand new buildings of the Medical Faculty and then began to bump along the new, wide, macadam road being built with the aid of Russian equipment and technicians. The foundation of broken stones was so rough that finally it drove us on to the footpath. At last, however, we were out of Kabul. Our first stop would be Ghazni, magic name. In my mind's eye I visualized slender blue-tiled towers, blue-domed mosques, marble tombs and a walled citadel. Alaptagin, the Turkish slave who became Governor of Korassan (the ancient name of Afghanistan) had sought refuge here in the tenth century and founded the Ghaznavid dynasty. His successor, Subaktagin, pushed the frontiers as far as the Oxus in the north and to the present boundary between Iran and Afghanistan to the west, and even occupied the whole of the Peshawar valley. Thus Ghazni had been the capital of a great military empire and the seat of two dynasties; it was also renowned for its learning and art. From here Mahmud of Ghazni, patron of the arts, zealous missionary for Islam, had twelve times invaded India, once getting as far south as Kathiawar, from whose great temple of Somnath he removed a sacred image and a pair of impressive sandalwood gates.

With booty from India, Mahmud had endowed universities and colleges and beautified his capital, building the great mosque known as "The Bride of Heaven". He died the ruler of an empire that included the Punjab as well as land beyond the Oxus and stretched from the Tigris to the Ganges. Two centuries later this glorious city was captured and burnt to the ground by Ala-ud-Din who thus gained the title of Jahan-Suz (earth burner).

I wondered how much remained of glorious Ghazni now.

Apart from a slight incident when L'Idiot mistook the sleeping Jacques' straw hat for a special delicacy, and chewed half the remaining brim, the journey continued peacefully. Behind me Ginette and Achour were for the first time exchanging reminiscences. Ginette had fought with the Maquis during the war and had ended up with General Leclerc's forces in North Africa; she had travelled on foot and by camel right across the Sahara. The names of Tamanrasset, Agades, the Hoggar, places I had planned to visit had I not come to Afghanistan, fell sweetly on my ears as the two discovered mutual acquaintances and well-remembered haunts. Soon they had burst into song—Arab chants, French marching songs and a Turkish love song.

Our speed of a sober forty kilometres an hour was governed not only by the deep ruts but by the pace of the heavily-laden lorry behind us. Gradually the distance between the villages increased, the trees grew fewer, the valley widened, the mountain-rimmed horizon receded farther and farther.

So far we had had few fellow travellers on our road. Coming out of Kabul we had passed the occasional lorry top-heavy with cheerful Afghans who seemed to overflow from every window, who clung to every protrusion and grasped with incredible tenacity at mountainous loads of luggage piled on top. As we drove by, their smiling faces were enveloped in the cloak of dust that swirled about our vehicles, but when I looked back there were only broad grins to be glimpsed dimly through the cloud. Where a hand-hold could be spared, a cheery wave was added.

Occasionally we had met a long string of camels, ragged, shaggy, dark brown Bactrians, laden with deep panniers of dried fruit and hand-woven mats. Each caravan was headed by half a dozen lighter, tawny camels, very superior beasts with their noses in the air, proudly carrying household goods tied up in gaily striped rugs edged with cowrie shells and blue beads. These were surmounted by little families, the women in dusty red garments nursing dusty-haired, bright-eyed urchins bedecked with silver coins and crudely-hammered jewellery. With them, cuddled on their laps or tied to the baggage by one leg, clucking chickens, plaintive kids and lambs, sleepy-eyed dogs, rode the desert in comfort.

Along the road marched the men, for the most part gay and smiling, the ends of their long, dark hair straggling from under caps embroidered with tiny mirrors and sometimes bound round with turbans of black or white cotton. Their velvet waistcoats were lavishly decorated with gold and silver thread, and they strode along in their great baggy trousers of white, black or red, with full-skirted shirts to match and a gay blanket thrown across one shoulder. The small boys pulled rude faces as small boys will, or shouted out greetings with a wave or a military salute. These were the advance guard of the Kuchhis, Asia's last remaining true gipsies who move *en masse* down the hills to their winter quarters on the southern plains or still farther south, to the Indus Valley in Pakistan.

Soon we were climbing up the bare mountain that barred the way to Ghazni. In winter this pass, the 9,000-ft. Gomal, was often blocked with snow, but approaching it from the already high northern plain it was unimpressive, the bare outcroppings of rock descending gently to Ghazni some eighteen hundred feet lower.

We had taken four hours to drive less than a hundred miles, but by mail lorry it would have been a day's journey. We were making good time.

* * * *

Oh, how disappointing was the first glimpse of Ghazni! I was watching for the romantic medieval city of my dreams and what did I see? A new bazaar of mud-brick shops and cafés with bright neon lights and an impressive pink-brick building on a small hill, so surrounded by police that I took it for Police Headquarters—it was the hotel! Mad Amin and Jean-Marie went off in search of petrol; the servants made a bee-line for the bazaar and Ginette took the rest of us into the *posteen* bazaar to equip us for the coming winter.

The remnants of the old mud-brick bazaar, pulled down only months previously, faced starkly-new open-fronted shops, most of them now shuttered and barred for the midday rest. But eyes must have been peering through peepholes and the jungle telegraph signalled the arrival of prospective customers, for within seconds the shutters were down and the shops ready for business, their harsh façades softened by the mantle of sheepskin coats and jackets soon hung about every entrance. Down the road we wandered, one shop after another offering nothing but *posteens*, for Ghazni is the home of this famous garment. Tiny white sheepskin waistcoats embroidered with blue and red silk flowers, just big enough for a one-year old, hung next to great shaggy garments of black or brown fur, the leather on the outside dyed saffron yellow, with long sleeves that hung to the wearer's knees.

One after another the shopkeepers would proffer their goods, shaking them out with affection to display the silky fur.

"See, *Khanum*, see this fine *posteen*!" they would beckon eagerly.

A small boy, his embroidered cap at a rakish angle, pulled at my sleeve and held out a waistcoat just big enough for a child in arms. An old man, his white beard stained yellow where his saffron-wet fingers had stroked it absent-mindedly, reached out of his cubby hole and with an engaging but toothless smile, invited us to inspect his obviously-superior *posteens*.

I fondled one or two with gleaming, silky-white fur, but white was really too impracticable for a working garment, I decided wistfully. As though he was a mind-reader, the small boy who had dogged my footsteps, rushed into a neighbouring stall and emerged with an armful of brown sheepskin waistcoats which he thrust into my arms. The white-bearded old gentleman appeared not to resent this at all, indeed, I suppose that most of the shopkeepers were related and profits probably pooled, because often a man would send to his neighbour's shop if you couldn't find what you wanted in his.

At last I bargained for an enchanting garment, the yellow skin entirely covered in closely-stitched flowers of pillar-box red, with here and there a spot of periwinkle blue. With yellow-stained fingers leaving saffron prints on my shirt, the old man patted the waistcoat into place.

"*Khub ast, Khanum Sahib—besyar khub ast,*" he smiled a proud and toothless smile.

Opposite the *posteen* bazaar, a steep ramp led through the remains of a battlemented gateway. Only a matter of months ago, according to Ginette, this had been a splendid covered gateway in true medieval tradition, closed and barred from sunset to sunrise. Now it was mainly a heap of rubble added to the debris of the old bazaar.

Yet what did remain within the mud-brick walls and gateway of Ghazni's covered market, was sheer, tantalizing delight. Shaded by leafy branches spread on beams across the narrow lanes, the bazaar twisted and turned to give sudden but rare glimpses of the tangle of blank-walled houses that clung to the hillside behind the shops. An unexpected gap in the leafy roof, allowed a shaft of sunshine to strike a booth where scarlet, azure, peppermint-green, royal-purple and saffron-yellow silks hung from every corner like extravagant splashes of oil paint. From the depths of a coppersmith's shop, bright heaps of polished dishes and fat, satisfyingly chubby pans glinted and winked as though filled with liquid light. Shady cubby holes revealed trays of silver jewellery and sparkling gems. Eager hands offered fistfuls of coins; everyone knew that foreigners were fools enough to pay high prices for old coins that no sensible person would try to use. Achour and Maricq, keen collectors, dallied over thick, square Kushan coins, thin slivers of silver adorned with Greek profiles, heavy copper of unknown vintage; here and there they found one that was new to them and not obviously faked. Like the Gardner-ware crockery, the ancient coins were now being cleverly forged on the principle that you can't have too much of a good thing.

All too soon we emerged from the other end of the bazaar. At the foot of the hill we were swept into a mêlée of horses, camels, men and boys, one party trying to force a way out of the narrow exit from the dried-up river bed—now a seething mass of merchants and their caravans—and the other party equally determined to lead their donkeys, burdened with ripe melons, to the caravanserai on the river bed. In the general pandemonium we were separated and I found myself wandering alone in the general direction of the truck. A youth with a rose behind his ear offered me a freshly-severed goat's head from a pile neatly arranged before him; by his side, an old man dozed gently under the scanty shade of a dwarf palm, surrounded by a heap of pale-yellow melons looking like petals from some gigantic flower.

Suddenly I heard my name. There about three feet from the ground, the whole party, except for Ginette, was sitting on the floor of a *chai-khana*.

"Ginette has found somewhere of her own, I don't know where," shouted Jean-Marie, "—come and have lunch."

Ravenous, I agreed eagerly and climbed the rickety steps. Together with Hashim, Mad Amin, Hassan and the cook, we occupied the whole of one wall of the tea house. Opposite us, local customers were crowded round the big *bokhari* stove with its enormous bubbling samovar gleaming in the sun; the shelves above were crammed with the blues and reds of Gardner-ware, but it appeared that only tea was served. I sat down on the reed matting covered with a tattered rug and stretched out my legs.

Hassan produced some enormous flaps of *nan*, the dark, unleavened bread of Afghanistan, and Mad Amin contributed a fresh melon. I stretched out my hand for a slice of the cool, juicy fruit.

"No," forbade Jean-Marie sternly. "Not for you with your Kabulitis. Do you wish to have it again?" he added, reminding me of the misery I had endured from this complaint during the last few days.

Reluctantly I took the dry *nan* and washed it down with half a dozen tiny cups of pale-green tea. Across the room, with exquisite good manners, the citizens of Ghazni talked in low tones and sipped their tea; not one turned to stare at the strangers in their weird assortment of clothes.

We finished the tea and Mad Amin was despatched to find Ginette. It was one o'clock and time to start on the hundred and fifty miles to Kilat-i-Ghilzai where we were to spend the night. Ginette, a look of contentment on her face, came slowly up the road.

"Oh, such good food," she sighed happily, like a kitten savouring stolen cream. "A so wonderful rice and chicken. . . ."

We shushed her quickly and piled into the car that was a small furnace from the midday sun.

* * * *

Out once more on to a long and straight and dusty road that led to Kandahar. Where were the famous Towers of Victory? Where were the tombs of Sultan Mahmad and Behram Shah and Sultan Subaktagin? Surely *they* were still here—surely they had not been sacrificed to progress? Quickly Jean-Marie reassured me. "They are on the other road, the old road to old Ghazni. Today we have no time, but when we come back, then we will show them to you."

Crane my neck as I would, I could see no sign of even the tip of a slender tower. I would have to be patient for a few more months.

The hills were still close, hemming us in as we drove southwards. "Je n'ai pas tué, je n'ai pas volé," sang Achour gaily. One by one we joined in the song of the galley slave.

For the first time I began to notice the caravanserais along the road. Enormous roofless squares enclosed by high, mud-brick walls, often with watchtowers at the corners, they were theoretically built every six korohs (a koroh is about two and a half miles). Fourteen or fifteen miles is about as much as a camel caravan can make in a day, and the *serais* provide welcome shelter for men and animals; although today the need for protection from robbers is lessened, there are still hungry wolves in the hills, ready to attack animals and men especially during a hard winter. Inside the *serais* there is usually nothing more than a series of low walls to provide separate enclosures for the animals of different caravans. Each group of men builds its own fire and cooks its own meals, camping down by its animals.

Every now and then we had to leave the road and make a diversion down into a dried-up river bed. Then, with tremendous effort, we had to climb up the other side, there to pause until the truck behind us had safely negotiated the hazard. It seemed as though every bridge and culvert on the road—and there were plenty—must have been washed away or broken down, and as we passed, gangs of workmen would pause on their long-handled shovels, each with a rope attached just above the blade so that one man would hold the handle and push, and his companion, facing him, would pull on the rope, the shovel digging the ground between his legs. This joint effort was said to produce better results than two men working separately and I had often seen it used in Baluchistan too.

Scattered along the roadside were the remnants of many a truck pitched head first over broken bridges. Often a truck would just collapse quietly by the track and several times we passed lorries tilted at an angle in a ditch. While the driver and his mate of such a vehicle strove to restart, the passengers unpacked themselves and made the best of a bad job; where there was fuel they would light fires and boil tea; where the country was scrubless desert they philosophically stretched themselves out full-length, covered their heads with their turbans, and dreamt the hours away.

As the afternoon grew hotter our mouths grew more and more parched and filled with dust; our singing had a tendency to trail away. The Tarnak Valley had been gradually widening until just as we were approaching a small hill, Jean-Marie swung the car off the track and pulled up by a small stream that bubbled unexpectedly and sparklingly fresh from a hole in the ground.

"Voilà—the source of the Tarnak! Here it is safe to drink water."

Out we tumbled, L'Idiot and all, to rush down to the banks of the rippling stream. In his eagerness Jean-Marie missed his footing and slipped into the clear water—no one laughed more loudly at his dripping figure than Hashim, Hassan, Mad Amin and the Cook (who curiously enough never did seem to have any name other than Cook), and it was no loss of face for Jean-Marie that they did so. It was one of the more endearing characteristics of the Afghans that they toadied to nobody.

Scores of tiny fish, bleached and of all hues, fought with each other as the bubbling water forced them into the sunlight from the dark, small hole in the ground. The water was sweet and ice-cold; it rippled down the valley over brown, speckled stones. As we watched, a small boy meandered up with his flock of fat-tailed dhumba sheep, and a swaggering, broad-shouldered shepherd strolled by with a black-faced, day-old lamb in his arms.

How vividly the Bible comes to life when one travels in the East! The blessed relief of even a scrap of shade provided by a scrawny tree; the bliss of fresh, sweet water on parched lips, and the stinging disappointment when a well or stream proves dry or full of brackish fluid; the indescribable delight of stepping out of the blinding glare of the desert into the welcome hospitality of a sprawling goatshair tent, and the unspeakable luxury of cool water washing dusty, aching feet. . . .

These were everyday experiences in the Holy Land but they lost much of their significance when merely read about in the temperate greenery of Britain.

Five minutes' break, half an apple each, large, juicy and sharply-sweet, then back into the truck and wagon and on through mile after mile of increasingly monotonous landscape, relieved only by the broken bridges and bumpy diversions through dried-up river beds. The country grew more and more desolate, the hard desert split by deep ravines. By seven o'clock it was quite dark; our forty kilometres an hour dropped abruptly and it took a quick, keen eye to spot the diversions in time to avoid an accident.

"Not long now," Jean-Marie had promised at least an hour earlier. As it grew darker Jacques roused himself to peer out of the window. He normally left most of the talking to others but now he too began to reassure us; yes, he was certain we were approaching Kilat-i-Ghilzai. He remembered that clump of trees, that tiny huddle of houses; at the next bend in the road we should see the lights of Kilat.

Half an hour later we were still twisting and turning along winding hilly roads, pausing from time to time until we saw the lights of the truck behind us and could be sure it had not fallen into a ravine.

It was about half-past eight when we suddenly came upon Kilat-i-Ghilzai; there were no lights to betray the presence of human beings; the moon had not yet risen and one could just discern a thicker lump of blackness to the right, against the dark sky, and a dense blot to the left that proved to be the hotel.

As the engine was switched off a heavy blanket of silence descended upon the night. Not so much as a glimmer of light, not a sound disturbed the rest of the good citizens of Kilat until the truck rumbled up behind us; then with much banging and hooting of horns, the manager of the hotel was roused and finally emerged, lantern in hand, to greet us sleepily. We were led into a hall of seemingly vast proportions, carpeted with gaily-patterned rugs. It was like walking into some baronial castle, I reflected, as I tried to glimpse the ceiling that was too high to be seen in the dim light provided by the manager's lantern.

There was a muttered conference; we were in luck, the hotel had many vacant rooms, three to be exact, and we could go two to a room. Thinking that, as in Baluchistan, we would be staying in resthouses where no bedding was provided, I had packed my night-clothes and towel in my bedding roll, a bulky object tightly strapped to the truck. But this hotel provided mattresses and our bedding was not being unloaded.

"But you have a night bag," Ginette reminded me. "You have your nightdress in that?"

Abashed, I had to confess that my overnight case was packed with film. With an expression that clearly showed her dismay at this impractical Englishwoman, Ginette turned to charm the manager into providing two clean sheets for us.

Approached for food, the manager had laughed indulgently. "No food, everything closed," he announced with the cheerfulness of one who had himself dined well.

"But surely there must be something in the bazaar, some rice, even some eggs?" urged Jean-Marie who had caught a glimpse of flickering lights at the end of the road.

Dubiously the manager shook his head; there was certainly nothing in his hotel—he did not reckon to provide food and it was not his fault for we had not let him know we were coming. As for the bazaar, well, all respectable folk had been abed long ago, but he would see what he could do. At least he could give us *chai*.

Tea would certainly help—"and some hot water also," added Ginette, as she produced a tin of instant coffee from her case.

A table had been wedged between the two beds in the room we were to share and a lamp threw flickering shadows into the dark corners. My stomach seemed glued to my spine. The long drive had given me an appetite and apart from a piece of dry toast and some coffee at four thirty that morning, and some tea and dry bread at noon, it had been a day of fasting. Ginette rose to the occasion magnificently.

Goggle-eyed, we sat on the beds and watched her produce a tin of pork paté and a chocolate bar. The manager appeared at the door smiling broadly and bearing an armful of *nan*—I noticed the bread here was the size and shape of snow-shoes instead of being like the round dinner plates of Kabul—and a dozen hard-boiled eggs laid by some pigmy hen. It was a feast!

We had almost cleared the table before anyone realized that Jacques and Achour were missing.

"Sound asleep—much too tired to eat," explained Jean-Marie. Guiltily we put aside the last two eggs for their breakfast and then, replete and exhausted, we too fell on our beds.

* * * *

The sun streamed through the barred windows of our room and roused us at half-past seven. Outside, rising on a mound beyond the hotel, was a perfect, fairy-tale fortress. At its foot stretched Kilat's one street with a chained petrol pump right in the centre. This was unlocked with much rattling of chains so that we might fill up the vehicles. While this was done I eyed the open gateway to the *serai* across the road. There was a large courtyard surrounded by a rickety-looking two-storied gallery.

"That is where we stayed with the Schlumbergers for eight days," Ginette told me with a shudder of reminiscence. "It rained—oh, it just rained and rained all the time. There was no hotel then and *pauvre* Jacques, it was the first time he have stayed in one *serai* and all sleeping together on top of one stove, you know? He was very shy!"

Jacques blushed hotly and energetically denied his bashfulness.

"Oh, yes, I think you were very shock," laughed Ginette.

The petrol was taking a long time to pump by hand to the station wagon and I turned to look at the fortress on the hill.

"I'm going to climb up there and take a photo," I announced, and started to get out of the car.

There was a rush to restrain me.

"Please, don't give us trouble," pleaded Ginette.

Jacques explained.

"You see, Dr. Schlumberger felt just the same and he climbed up that hill but not even with a camera. He walked round the fortress to look at it, and suddenly he was pulled inside the gateway and arrested as a spy!"

I sank back in my seat and looked with new respect at the castle I'd thought deserted. I still wanted to see Mundigak and had no intention of languishing in some dungeon before satisfying my curiosity.

Only eighty-four miles to go now, through a dull, monotonous plain never out of sight of mountains. As we neared Kandahar orchards bordered the roadside and the mountains receded to the far horizons.

We had dropped two thousand feet on the way from the pass and now we were only 3,500 feet above sea-level. Maybe at last my nose and ears would stop bleeding, a minor irritation that had worried me since landing at Kabul.

Fringing Kandahar were the strangely shaped low mountains that had earned the nicknames of "Camel", "Ant-Hill", "Elephant" and others equally realistic. Then with the airfield just in sight, we had our one and only puncture of the journey. So it was early afternoon before we drove between the remnants of a magnificent avenue of cypress trees through a modern bazaar to the main square with its curious little open-sided mosque looking like a miniature bandstand, and up to the striped façade of the Hotel de Kandahar.

The first stage of our journey to Mundigak was over.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# *The Last Lap*

THE HOTEL DE KANDAHAR was quite impressive from the outside, with its armed sentry at the gate guarding the pergolas and formal gardens.

That evening we left the boys at the hotel and drove out to Manzil Bagh, to revel in the generous hospitality of a warm-hearted Italian family. Until recently Manzil Bagh had been a nobleman's private estate but open to the public, as are so many of the lovely private estates in Afghanistan. Manzil Bagh, with its stately groves of cool trees, its fountains and pools and flowers was one of the glories of Kandahar. Now its high walls were reinforced with barbed wire; yellow searchlights swept the grounds at night and steel-helmeted guards checked all visitors. It was now the headquarters of the American Morrison-Knudsen Company, with vast workshops, efficient workers in overalls and jeans, and everywhere giant, yellow bulldozers, tractors, trucks and petrol tankers and the paraphernalia of a great construction company responsible for all public works in the area.

Next morning we wandered through the bazaars. Kandahar is the second largest city in Afghanistan, built in the eighteenth century by Ahmad Shah Durrani whose rule had extended as far as Delhi. In those days Kandahar was the capital of Afghanistan; even today it is still important and drastic changes are in progress. Not so long ago it had still been an old-style Asian city surrounded by a 30-ft.-high mud-brick wall pierced by four gateways. The two main streets crossed at the centre, in Greek fashion, and a covered market place was built at the intersection. Each quarter of the city so divided, was occupied by one of the four main tribes of the area. Workmen were busily pulling down the lovely crenellated city walls and the one-time covered cross-roads had become an open square with a tiny mosque in the middle.

Through the centre of the city runs a wide canal fringed with trees; here a turbanned tribesman led his horse to stand ankle-deep in the cool water as he washed it affectionately. A couple of small boys skimmed flat round pebbles at the ducks and an elderly man, his grey hairs dyed an uneven henna, squatted down to wash out his turban. Here and there under the trees, street traders crouched in the shade, a striped shawlful of vegetables in front of them, a pair of rough scales held in one hand. Suspended from long willowy poles outside the shops, or from the lower branches of the trees, were dozens of collapsible bird cages of brightly coloured netting, shaped like half an egg. Red, green, yellow, and blue, they looked like so many Chinese lanterns and were occupied by tiny nightingales or plumped-out fighting partridges.

Every now and then we passed the entrance to a shadowy passage-way between two blocks and at last we turned into one of the covered bazaars, reminiscent of the famous covered market of Istanbul but much smaller, consisting here of only two or three lanes.

We ran the gauntlet of a cross-fire of invitations as dozens of shoemakers held out their goods for our closer inspection; tinsel-bright sandals, heavy *chaplies* and old army boots from surplus stores were shown us; here and there one man more interesting than the rest proffered a stool and a cup of green tea for us to sip.

"Look, look!" cried Ginette as we entered a lane of tiny stalls displaying thousands of embroidered *kulla* caps. Stiffened helmets of high, oval-crowned velvet, small, round skull-caps or, soft pill-boxes, they were all elaborately embroidered with real gold and silver thread and winking sequins—not for the womenfolk, for they wore only veils—but for the roguish-eyed, long-haired men. There were small skull-caps crocheted in stiff pink and white thread, which gave them a remarkably Swiss appearance; there were waistcoats trimmed with gold and silver on purple, or ruby and midnight blue velvet; and there were piles, each the size of a dinner plate, of material of which each piece was beautifully embroidered in four leaves like those of clover.

Up and down the lanes small boys and girls wandered with two or three such pieces in their hands, offering them for sale to passers-by and shopkeepers; one or two veiled women were holding out embroidery pieces in a somewhat diffident fashion. Some wore white *chadris*, some a style that was new to me; black gowns and a piece of white material with the usual little net window across the eyes, tied round the head and falling to the waist in front, which gave the wearers the appearance of penguins. These were Shia women, mostly coming originally from Iran.

The majority of Muslims are either Sunnis or Shias; most Afghans are orthodox Sunnis accepting that part of the Shariat or Islamic Law based on Mohammed's own words or acts but not actually written by him. The Shias on the other hand, reject this law and look upon Ali, the Prophet's nephew and son-in-law, as his lawful first successor, ignoring the first three Imams, Abubakar, Omar and Ottman, who are accepted by the Sunnis.

The pieces of embroidery hawked by the women and children, were in fact the crowns of the *kulla* caps, all of them worked at home by the women and afterwards made up by the men. Ginette bargained for a round of embroidery and then sat in a tiny shop while her hat was created for her. It was fascinating to watch the men sticking the tops on to stiff canvas backings, taking a mouthful of water and spraying in a fine stream on to the canvas; it was all done so quickly: pick up a top, pick up the cut-out canvas, hold both together, take a mouthful of water and spray through pursed lips, place the two pieces of material on a pile and let the next man machine them.

The machinist would select a piece of contrasting cord and perhaps a tinsel ribbon and three separate strips of velvet—gold or silver—and deftly stitch all together to form the edge of the cap. A bright pink lining with a white or navy silk fringe, a pink tassel caught in the rim, and another *kulla* hat was ready to go on the wooden block for shaping.

Thinking that Ginette's cap, being made to order, would surely be more expensive than a ready-made one, I moved next door to select a cap for myself from a great pile on the floor. As I searched in my handbag for a pocket mirror to see the effect, the shopkeeper put out one slender brown hand to stop me. Pushing his turquoise turban to the back of his head, he knelt on the little platform before me and gazed intently into my eyes.

"Ah, *Khanum*," he reproached me gravely, "what need is there of a looking-glass when you can use my eyes?" and solemnly he posed motionless, his great dark eyes level with mine.

How could I use an ordinary mirror after such a gesture?

I finally decided on a gorgeous affair of dark blue velvet thickly encrusted with gold and silver embroidery; it cost seventy-five Afghanis. Pleased with myself for having haggled the price down from a hundred, I went to see how Ginette was getting on. Her milliner had just finished off a hat made to measure in marmalade velvet, adorned with sequins, gold and silver embroidery and a red tassel.

"Thirty-five Afghanis!" she announced triumphantly.

The *kulla* caps are of course, always worn by men—women wear only a long scarf or veil. But Ginette and I both had the same idea; the hats would look wonderful at the theatre or for cocktail parties back in Europe.

After lunch, Ginette and I took the station wagon and with Mad Amin driving, Ebrahim, who had been waiting for our arrival, and Hashim sitting primly by his side, we drove some twelve miles out of the city.

Hashim, a beautiful, sloe-eyed youth of seventeen, acted as general assistant to Hassan, the major-domo of the Casal establishment, and had what proved to be a completely justified reputation as a Don Juan. It was his first visit to Kandahar and Ginette asked how he liked the city. He blinked his great brown eyes, heavily outlined in *kohl*, wrinkled his classical nose in distaste, and made some comment nodding out of the window to a troop of asses trotting along the dusty road.

"What does he say?" I asked Ebrahim.

Ebrahim turned a dusky pink.

"Hashim, well, he say Kandahar is no good—the women here all ugly. He say they look like the behinds of those donkeys!"

Hashim, with a superior smile, settled back smugly.

We drove through a range of low, rugged mountains—"the Elephant", the "Camel" and the "Ant-heap". Down in the valley before us lush green trees waved leafy branches within the shelter of a long mud-brick wall. A stream ran alongside the wall and here and there were little clusters of beehive-roofed houses nestling among scattered trees. Once again I was struck by the remarkable fertility of what was apparently barren desert. Wherever there was water, the land would bloom, but only half a mile farther on, as though divided by an invisible, ruler-drawn line, the stony desert completely possessed the landscape.

Within the confines of the long wall we found orchards of pomegranates, a tiled swimming pool, its surface covered with floating leaves, terraces and formal gardens ablaze with scarlet geraniums, palms and cypress trees and placid gardeners working methodically, watched by bright-eyed squirrels.

The next morning was Thursday, the great day of our departure for—and arrival at—Mundigak. We were all up at six o'clock. We had packed our bedding rolls and exercised L'Idiot who slept across the doorway and was regarded with due respect by all the other guests and staff. Few Afghans keep dogs as pets in the European sense; most are watchdogs, deep-chested with close-cropped ears to give their rivals less to grip; they are trained to fly at the throats of strangers. L'Idiot, though friendly with Europeans and the household staff, growled menacingly at strange Afghans and although he had never been known to attack, the mere sight of him was sufficient protection for baggage left in his charge.

Sterilized petrol cans were filled with drinking water from the tank in the hotel grounds, and the bedding rolls were loaded on to the truck together with wicker baskets of fruit and vegetables kept cool by a layer of vine leaves.

The road led us past a charming little mosque and the high prison walls where small groups of cheerful-looking prisoners wearing their own clothes marched under armed escort to their day's work on the roads. By the River Arghandeb busy, steel-helmeted Afghan workmen were toiling with the giant, yellow bulldozers of the M-K Company constructing a new bridge here—how long, I wondered, since these same tribesmen had been driving nothing more mechanical than a camel?

Once across the river we were moving into groves of reeds, their feathery tips reaching up some twelve or fifteen feet into the sunshine. Next we had to cross a plain with only the faint marks of tyre tracks in the sand to mark a path.

Beehive-roofed hamlets snuggled by the river bank to our right; here and there the track was interrupted by fragile mud-and-wattle bridges spanning irrigation ditches; soon even these petered out into desert. The fertile Kandahar Valley was behind us; where it ended, the desert took possession utterly.

Jean-Marie pointed. "There in front you see Siah Sang Pass—that is, Black Stone Pass."

We had turned north towards a line of low, black mountains splashed with one white patch. As we drove into the black hills, a feeling of foreboding seemed to sweep across us. The range was probably little more than a thousand feet above the plain, but so dark, so grim and completely barren, with such menacing black rocks, that it seemed the made-to-measure setting for a Shakespearian tragedy. It was a relief to emerge on the other side of the gloomy, winding track to see a large valley rimmed with grey-blue peaks.

"Mundigak," announced Jean-Marie, pointing across the valley.

Achour and I, tense with anticipation, peered through the windscreen trying to make out the lighter speck to the left of the pass. In the back seat, Ginette was scribbling madly in a notebook where she kept details of times and mileages for every journey. Jacques, his brown eyes shining in quiet excitement, looked across the valley in silence; Maricq's bony features were expressionless; was he excited too or did the idea of Mundigak leave him completely unmoved?

I felt I had enough emotion for everyone as I tried to make out the pale eminence that rose from the flat valley. A smudge of dark green here and there indicated a small village, each dependent for its water on the underground channels called *karezes*, as the wide bed of the river, from which the valley took its name, had dried up centuries, possibly thousands of years before, its course probably diverted by an earthquake.

The whole district was known as Kar Karez and the track eventually took us through a village called Mundigak, the name Jean-Marie had borrowed for the mound. High mud-brick walls, square, flat-roofed houses, all skirting the grey gravel of the river-bed, this was Mundigak village, but not our ultimate destination. The track still ran for several miles across the river bed and on to the next range of hills, but suddenly we turned off by a small cairn of white-washed mud-pisé erected by the side of the road. This was the signpost to the dig. We turned towards the west across hard, dry, hilly ground split by crevasses and the stream beds through which no water flowed. We rocked and bumped, guided by the ancient tracks left by the vehicles last year and the year before that. Gradually the country resolved itself into a series of shallow mounds rising like air bubbles on freshly-beaten batter until we topped one of the bubbles to see the excavations crowning the highest mound of all.

Entranced I gazed through the heat-haze of noon. From here the dig appeared to be a muddle of walls and roofless rooms growing out of the top of a pudding from which the crown had been sliced. On a shallower mound at the foot half a dozen small mud huts huddled forlornly. All the villages we had seen from the pass seemed to have vanished. There was no water, nothing grew within miles of the camp, unless you counted the prickly camelthorn scrub. Here there was nothing but the remnants of a civilization whose very existence had lain forgotten for three thousand years.

We might have been a million miles from the civilization of Kandahar.

For the last quarter of a mile we dropped into a hollow to follow the windings of a path between the mounds. We drove up the side of the camp site and parked on a levelled-off patch of land by the largest of the mud huts.

As we stepped out into the midday sun, an ancient, white-bearded man with sky-blue shirt, baggy *purtak* trousers and white turban came running from one of the cabins to clasp Jean-Marie's hands to his heart. Sultan Mahommed, the caretaker was ready to relinquish his charge.

## CHAPTER SIX

# *Dream into Reality*

I STARED ENTRANCED at the sturdy colonnade of whitewashed mud bricks that nearly five thousand years ago thousands of workmen must have toiled to construct.

While we unloaded the luggage, Mad Amin and the ancient Sultan were busily removing the wooden boards nailed across the windows of the mud cabins; jingling a large bunch of keys, Ginette opened the padlocked doors. The largest of the huts was the communal dining-cum-living room; it had a wide window at either end and a table hinged to the wall below which covered the window when the cabin was shut up.

As the tables were dropped, light flooded in and I looked around at the room that was to be our social headquarters for the next few months. Two long benches flanked the larger of the tables, a roughly-made dresser and two small cupboards stood by the walls, a card table and some collapsible steel chairs supplemented the Madras basket chairs we had brought with us. It was the work of minutes to unroll the reed mats and lay them on the stamped-mud floor.

Cook had already disappeared into the opposite hut and soon a column of smoke was twisting up from the mud-brick oven; the fire was fed by logs we had brought from Kandahar. There were five small cabins together in an "L"-shape, one for food stores, one each for Jacques, Maricq and myself, with the kitchen in the middle. A hundred yards away up a slight rise, stood the Casals' office-cum-sleeping-quarters. A few yards away another group of cabins housed Ebrahim, archaeological equipment and the servants.

Ginette handed me a key and pointed to one of the cabins. "That is for you—and as Achour is the youngest, he will have to sleep in the tent."

Already, together with Jacques and a tall tribesman of extremely good looks, Achour was struggling to erect the tent, a handsome Indian affair with a yellow-patterned double lining. It was the one in which Jean-Marie and Ginette had spent the first season of the dig, the spring season when thunderstorms caused sudden spates from the hills, which flooded them out, and windstorms carried the tent away from their sleeping forms.

"It was terrible, we never seemed to have a hot meal, we never seemed to be dry," said Ginette; there was, she added for Achour's comfort, no chance of that happening at this time of the year. As soon as possible they had got the villagers to build a mud cabin for them, to which, gradually, the others had been added. Now there was even a bathroom, boasted Ginette, unlocking the door of the small hut that stood between the tent and her own cabin.

Coming out of the dazzling sunshine we were at first blinded. The hut was divided by a wall extending half-way across it; behind was the "shower", a kerosene tin with a garden hose nozzle, standing on a shelf in the wall. As Ginette hung up a mirror, found the wooden grating to put over the channel in the mud floor, and set up the canvas washbasin on its folding stand, I looked aghast at the bare walls and floor. For the walls were not bare; they seemed to be covered with black monsters, some obviously extinct but others only too much alive. Without turning a hair, Ginette took off her shoe and began to deal out deadly blows.

"Scorpions," she remarked calmly; the ground was littered with their corpses, now being attacked by large black ants an inch and a half long.

With no signs of disturbance other than a slight wrinkling of her small, straight nose, Ginette continued her slaughter while describing how one evening when she had been undressing to take a shower she had found a scorpion on her breast.

"What on earth did you do?" I asked from my safer situation outside the door.

"I stood still and called to Jean-Marie to come and knock it off," she replied. "It is quite all right if you do not move, but if you move then it will sting."

My enthusiasm for cleanliness had considerably diminished as I walked down a path carefully outlined with pieces of bowls and plates broken by some careless housewife five thousand years ago. . . .

I peered fearfully into the mud hut that was to be my home. Mad Amin had taken down the window shutter and was nailing a piece of wire netting across the gaping hole. There was a small mud shelf in one corner, on which one could stand a lantern. In another corner Mad Amin had fitted three somewhat warped shelves into a wooden framework. Hammered into the mud wall at intervals were the long nails that served as a wardrobe. Later Hassan brought a wooden stool and a table with two legs that in seeming contradiction to the laws of nature took the weight of my typewriter when stood against the wall.

I sat down to my first meal at Mundigak with the glimmerings of misgiving. Since our arrival the wind had been blowing ceaselessly and the sand penetrated in strong, relentless columns through the cracks in my cabin doors. This brought oppressive headaches and made breathing itself an effort. Then there were the insects; I had a horror of insects! And the isolation! I had not realized that we were to be quite so cut off from everything; even the nearest village was too far away to reach except by car. All the other Eastern digs I had heard about had been somewhere near a town or within reach at least of a few houses and a village teashop.

I looked through the wire netting stretched across the mess window, framing, like a painting, the large mound; "Tépé A" they called it—I could just glimpse the exciting-looking mud-brick colonnade on its brow. What had I said in London? That I was prepared to put up with any discomfort, even to sleep on the bare ground if only I could join the expedition? Suddenly I felt ashamed and reached for a piece of the thick, flat Afghan bread that was to be our staple item of diet. The others were hungrily tucking-in and L'Idiot, standing hopefully in the open door, was slowly waving his beautiful tail.

Two small, round-shouldered men with squinting eyes and sharp features barely visible through the folds of turban smothering their faces trotted past the window.

"Ah, *les souris,* the wall experts Bismullah and Khair-ullah," laughed Jean-Marie. "First to arrive as usual."

As I was to discover later, the nickname, "the mice", bestowed by their fellow-workers, suited the brothers well. There were in fact four of them; Bismullah had a gift for smelling out mud-brick walls in an excavation which was shared to a lesser degree by Khair-ullah; Amanullah and Njamtullah were *tukri-wallahs* performing the less exacting task of carrying to the rubbish tip the shallow metal bowls, called *tukris,* filled with excavated soil. In contrast to the normal sturdy villagers, the four brothers were all weedy, weak-eyed and round-shouldered with the quick, almost furtive little movements of mice. Not only did they accept their sobriquet with good humour but, indeed, were rather proud of it and sometimes played up to it.

After lunch we got to work preparing camp for the night. To-morrow being Friday, the Muslim Juma or day of rest, we would observe as a holiday. Work on the dig would start on Saturday.

With an inadequate stiff reed broom I tried to brush the sand from my room before laying down a reed mat; Jacques, passing the open door with an armload of drawing paper, laughed at my efforts; "Toujours il y a du vent et du sable," he comforted me. "No use to try and clean it."

Maricq carried in a camp bed, a French model made of steel and new to us both. After several squashed fingers we fitted it together and I saw with dismay that it was terribly low, not more than a bare scorpion length from the floor. That did nothing whatever to contribute to my peace of mind.

Before the sun went down that evening, Jean-Marie took us on a preliminary survey of Tépé A. As we climbed up the steep slope to the complex of walls, terraces, columns, corridors, rooms and battlements he explained that already the mound had been reduced to half its original height of sixty feet.

"First we found granaries and silos of mud pisé, then some habitations—but not settled, you understand, just nomads maybe, camping in the older ruins—and then the ruins themselves of the 'monument massif'. That was a very large, heavy building and underneath that we found, well, what you yourselves can see here."

We were standing on top of the mound overlooking the camp—a wonderfully strategic and imposing site with the whole valley spread before us. We walked to the edge of a wide terrace with a complex of small rooms opening into each other. There was a high but not very thick outer wall and a very narrow entrance in the middle. This opened out into what seemed to have been yet another terrace now eroded and crumbling down the hillside. Stepping through this narrow opening from the outside, I found myself in a corridor barely shoulder-width; to my left had once ascended a steep narrow staircase; to the right the corridor led to an even narrower exit on the very edge of the main terrace. This tiny corridor had been full of spent arrowheads, clay sling bullets, spear heads and traces of fire; there was little doubt that it had been hastily built as some kind of fortification and had been fairly easily taken after a sharp assault.

Back on the main terrace, lining the southern side to the right, stretched the famous colonnade. The columns were about four and a half feet high, standing on a small platform; many thick coats of whitewash still clung to the columns in places, even now after they had been deprived of their protective sand covering and re-exposed to the elements for the past twelve months. I was surprised by the brilliance of the red ochre paint on the doorway that cut the colonnade at its western end. Even today well-to-do villagers whitewash their houses every summer and one can fairly safely reckon a year's occupation for every layer of *chunam*, a kind of natural lime. Ginette Casal had managed to count twenty-nine distinct layers of this *chunam* on the walls of one room attached to the colonnaded building! This was only one of many examples we were to find of the uninterrupted pattern of thought and social customs that had prevailed for so many thousands of years in this conservative yet by no means historically tranquil corner of Asia.

Right along the bottom of the colonnade ran a small platform or bench, about two feet wide, and the tops of the half-columns backed by a mud-brick wall were decorated with mud-brick merlons arranged in a battlemented design.

The whole structure was made of mud brick and mud pisé, fashioned indeed of the very soil itself, mixed with water and in some cases a little chopped straw, and baked in the heat of the sun. It would take a very well trained and acute eye to mark the difference between walls and filling in the course of excavation, although like a good many other things, once the buildings had been revealed they were unmistakable. There was too much to absorb on a first visit and even at the end of the season it was uncertain what purpose the entire structure served; it may have been a temple, it may have been a palace or a public building, but so far there was no proof, although by the end of the dig, like everybody else, I had my own pet theories.

The inspection of Mound B a few hundred yards away was left for another day, and we walked down to the square mud-pisé boxes that were our cabins. In a hollow between my hut and the main mound an oblong was outlined on the ground in ancient potsherds, with a little bulge in the middle, facing west. This was the *Masjid* in which the more pious of the workmen said their prayers at mid-day and evening. To the south a dark line in the stony earth, running east to west, was the bed of the dried-up Kishk-i-Nakhod Rud from which the valley took its name. On the far side of the river bed lay a long strip of green—Mundigak village, the "village of the small mound" from which our camp was named. Did that mean that the village itself was built on the site of a smaller settlement than the one we were excavating, I wondered? Out of sight to the north-east was the larger village of Sheerga and it was from these and smaller hamlets in the valley that our workmen were to come, walking daily anything up to seven miles in each direction.

After tea, Jacques clapped on his straw hat, took a handful of shot and together with Achour shouldered a gun and went hunting for our supper, L'Idiot trotting happily at their heels. An hour later they returned with five plump pigeons.

Already the Mess had been transformed with yellow check curtains at the windows and over the open shelves on the cupboards. A *charpoy* (bed) had been placed along one wall and covered with a striped rug. On the wall behind the string bed a reed mat had been nailed as a headrest and above this were a couple of colourful Picasso-like sketches by Jacques. A storage jar several thousand years old and some three feet high, stood in the corner filled with feathery reeds from the groves we had passed on the road from Kandahar. Mad Amin had filled the hurricane lamps for the cabins and the oil lamp for the mess was already throwing out a brilliant yellow light.

Hungrily, we tucked into a meal of tender pigeons and fried potatoes. Then, each armed with a hurricane lamp, prepared for bed. Before I turned out the lamp I made what was to become a nightly inspection of my hut; under the bed, inside the bedclothes—no spider nor scorpion so far. To make sure, I sprayed the room heavily with DDT. Then I arranged my pocket flashlight on the table with a heavy Kabuli shoe as a weapon, placed the DDT gun and matches to hand, and thus armed settled down for what I was certain would be a sleepless night. Above me in the reeds across the roof beams, a constant rustling of insect life sent down a stream of fine mud to patter on the floor and on my bed. Around me small scratches and buzzes were almost as lively as my imagination. I turned out the lamp, turned over in my bed, and in a single movement toppled the entire affair on to the floor.

I woke to the sun streaming through the wire netting. It was six o'clock and despite my fears I had slept soundly throughout the night. The wind that yesterday had blown so violently all afternoon had now completely dropped. The morning was still and golden.

Jacques, you may recall, was an architect, and his first professional job on the site was to design a new privy. A couple of the villagers were already digging a hole some twenty yards away from the old one which was surrounded by a tattered and windswept reed mat.

Meanwhile, Ginette struggled in the primitive kitchen to make stocks of jam from the dried apricots she had bought in Kandahar; Achour in the tightest, briefest scarlet shorts and a check shirt, joined Maricq whose long bony knees emerged from almost as brief, tight khaki shorts, and together they practised weight-lifting with a colossal iron bar fitted with enormous weights, a little gadget one of them had managed to conceal in his luggage.

Presently Jean-Marie's deep voice was heard echoing round the camp as he rushed out of his cabin and hit his head on the low lintel. Even the shortest of us did this several times a day, for all the cabin doors were apparently designed for midgets. Ruefully rubbing a swelling bruise, Jean-Marie invited us to tour Tépé B.

About thirty feet high, this was a couple of hundred yards from the first mound and surrounded by a deep, defensive moat possibly dug at a time of impending attack but now partly filled in with rubble and overgrown with prickly camel-thorn bushes. Some day it would have to be excavated, but there would be no time for that this season. We trailed behind Jean-Marie up the long, gentle slope to the crest of the mound. A roughly "L"-shaped area had been excavated, in some places fifteen feet down to the virgin soil. There were stout walls a yard wide with clearly marked mud bricks laid on top of enormous, heavy stones that formed their foundations. Here and there, on what were the thick outer walls of a complex of houses, rose hefty, square buttresses.

This had obviously been an important and well designed section of the settlement.

I was going to have to learn a new vocabulary—in fact, several, in French, Pushtu and Persian, and to work in centimetres and metres instead of inches and feet; I never did have a head for figures and later on I was to spend hours pondering over the simplest calculations, lapsing every now and then into the English system with disastrous results to the plans I was drawing. Now I learnt that the mysterious word *sondage* that had appeared so often in letters from Dr. Schlumberger and was freely sprinkled around our conversations, meant nothing more terrifying than a trial trench, the normal way of deciding where one is going to start excavating a site of which the contents are completely unknown. I also learnt that each individual working area was called a *chantier* and I was to be the site supervisor for the northern end of an extension which Jacques was now measuring out on Tépé B—(I shall anglicize this word in future to "mound", although, like *Tell* in the Middle East, and *dhamb* in Baluchistan, it is the accepted description of a prehistoric mound in Afghanistan). Ebrahim and I would have adjoining sites to begin with, so that he could help me with the language problem. Maricq, with a reputation for painstaking exactitude, was to finish emptying a pit found last season in the floor of one of the central rooms.

Achour would work with Ginette on Mound A and Jacques was to give a hand wherever help was most needed while at the same time doing his primary task of surveying the site and drawing plans.

"And for the first time I shall be able to do the job I am meant to do, supervise, take photographs, sort potsherds and see that you do all the hard work," laughed Jean-Marie.

Dismay swept over me.

"But I shall spend at least a few days with Ginette or you?" I asked anxiously. "I've never worked on this kind of site, I've never had a gang of men to supervise—in Europe nearly all workers are trained students or experts—and anyhow, I don't know a word of Pushtu or Persian!"

Jean-Marie smiled, "Oh, you'll soon pick it up," he assured me casually.

By the time Ginette called out—"*À table*" I was more than ready for lunch and a drink of the Kandahar water. For cooking and washing, the ancient caretaker, Sultan, who had gone back to live in his village of Mundigak, was to make several trips daily from there to the camp, accompanied by a gaggle of small boys goading two or three reluctant donkeys laden with goatskins of water drawn from the Karez channel.

Tomorrow work would begin in earnest and Ginette gave us each a site box, a gaudily-painted affair bought in the Kandahar bazaar, green with pink and blue flowers and beaten out of the endlessly useful oil cans. Our shower for instance consisted of one of these tins with a wooden handle across the top, a tap at the bottom and the nozzle of a garden hose fitted into the tap. The whole stood on a bracket head-high and was filled with a bucket of hot water for each bather.

The painted site boxes contained our working kit: a locally-made knife, a slender steel implement resembling a surgical instrument, with an arrow-shaped scraper at one end and a slightly spoon-shaped handle for scooping the loose sand from long, narrow apertures at the other, a hank of stout string, a cigarette-tin full of paper clips and nails and another of labels and a pencil stub, a paint brush and a tape measure in metres, plus an exercise book. I had brought my favourite knife with a thin, worn blade and a black pineapple handle—I had found it in Elba during the war. And I had also packed my favourite trowel, an implement every self-respecting archaeologist in Britain carries with him night and day. But here I was to find it virtually useless in mud-pisé structures.

The pages of the exercise book were ruled on one side and covered with graph squares on the other. Carefully I wrote my name and the date and the site—"Mundigak, Tépé B, NE Extension 26".

I was all ready for what the morning might bring.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# *The Initiation*

I HAD SET the alarm for five o'clock. It was still dark but as I groped for my clothes I could see a faint red glow behind the dark silhouette of Mound A. Then suddenly it was morning. The days were hot but the nights and early mornings were cold and we helped ourselves to cups of coffee and plates of "porridge"—"Your Scottish food!" explained Jean-Marie, presumably to make me feel at home—but no Scot or Sassenach for that matter ever put spoon to such a concoction of flour and water and cocoa powder. Still, it was hot and it was filling, two main essentials for starting work on a cold, cheerless morning.

As we ate, shrouded figures muffled to the eyes approached from all directions, passing the window and squatting in front of the tool huts. Ebrahim who, unlike the traditionally lethargic Oriental, preferred to start too early rather than a moment too late was already calling the roll as Achour, always the last to part from his bed, came haring down from his tent clutching a much worn *chupan*—an Afghan overcoat—about him.

On the stroke of six, Ebrahim led a huddle of men on my site.

"There, these are for you!" he announced.

We surveyed each other somewhat apprehensively. All I could see were eleven pairs of eyes—brown, black, hazel, grey, green, and even one bright blue pair peeping through the folds of turbans and shawls. I wondered if their anonymous owners had any idea of how little I knew about the job.

The greeted me civilly enough in a mixture of Persian and Pushtu; then they squatted down with their shallow metal bowls, their picks, shovels, brushes and deep wicker baskets, awaiting my instructions.

I had counted on working with Ginette for a few days before being left on my own, in fact she had promised it, and now she came up, a scarf over her hair, a straw hat with an immense floppy brim clapped on top, and fastened with a fetching ribbon under her chin.

Achour and I were at opposite ends of the new extension for this first day and to begin with we were to remove the top layer of loose soil until we reached an occupation level; when this would be I didn't know—digging in England it was usually several feet beneath the surface. The first indication would probably be a slightly different consistency in the packing of the soil, and then small finds: sherds, beads, figurines.

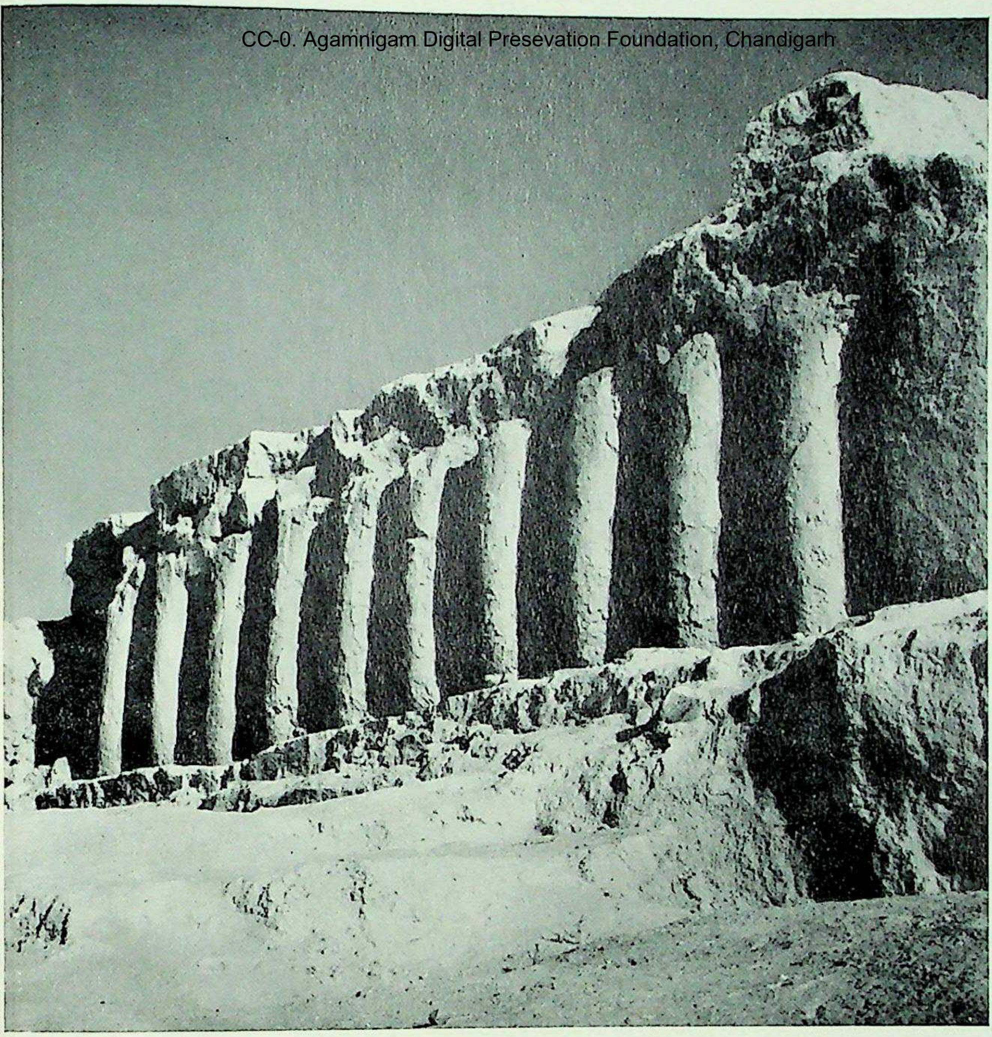
For the first two hours, while the sun still lurked near the horizon, it was bitterly cold standing on top of the mound exposed to the dawn breeze blowing off the mountain tops. I envied Maricq in his sheltered room below the surface where he was already finding traces of a hearth; and later on I envied him still more the shelter of the thick walls, for as the morning wore on, the sun's rays became searing in their power.

Anxious to justify the Casals' faith in me—"Your site will be the key to all the others," Ginette had told me encouragingly—and scared of missing the first traces of occupation, I remained tense and unrelaxed all morning. Everything was so new and strange and never had I felt so uncertain of myself, so inexperienced.

Before I could do anything I had to know the names of my gang—I couldn't even say "Hey, you!" at the moment.

I managed only four names to begin with; I was busy watching every movement of the pick lest it be swung with too much force, and each shovelful of earth lest it contain a sherd, for even the smallest scrap of pottery is important in helping to identify a layer and an era.

There were two hefty chaps with picks. One man with a splendid beard and a faded mauve turban was Bismullah (not to be confused with Bismullah the "mouse"). The other was a handsome youth called Mashuk with frank, open features and a film-star smile, his brown hair brushed into a ragged fringe beneath his emerald and gold cap. Of the two men with shovels one was Abdul, middle-

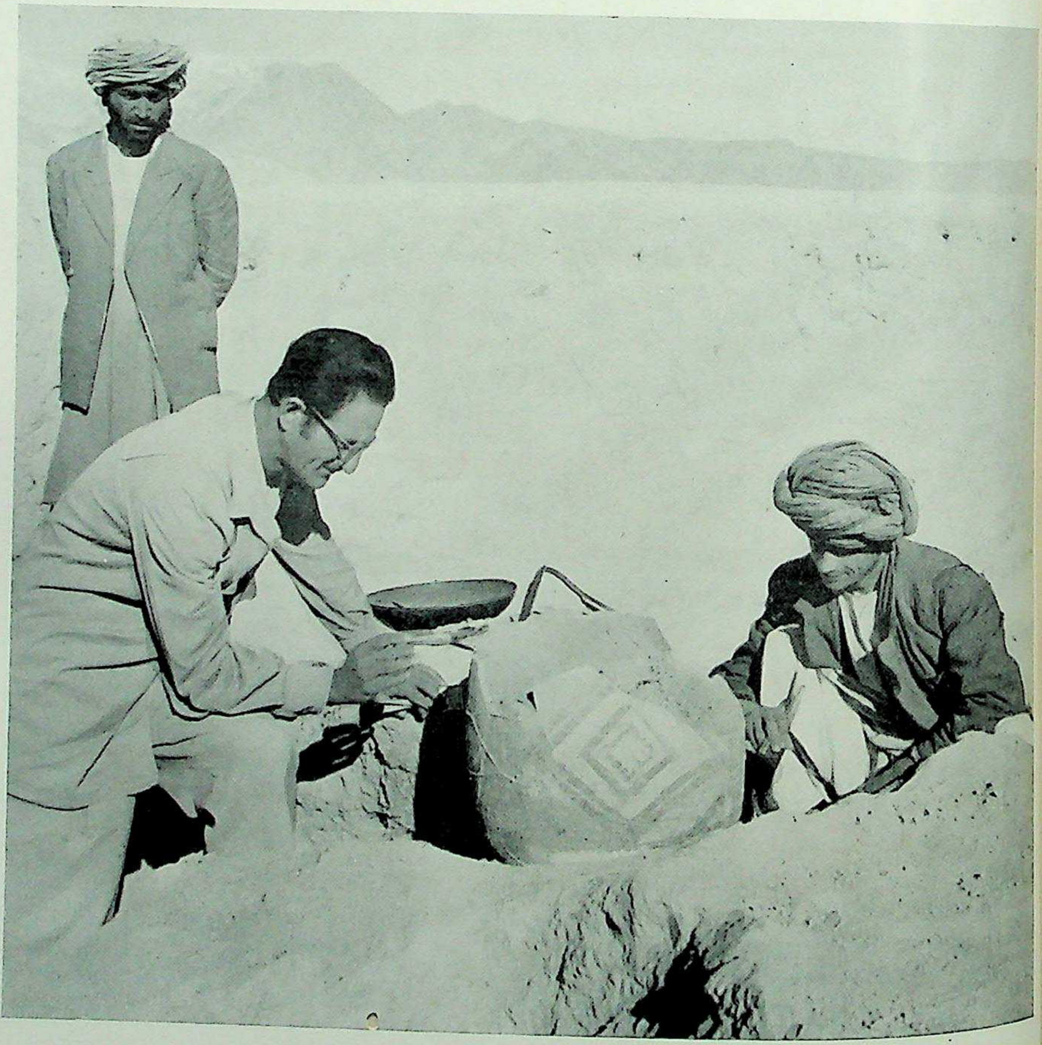


*Above:* This great colonnade of mud-brick columns was exposed on Mound A after several other habitation levels, including a much more massive building constructed on the ruins of the colonnaded monument, had been removed. The mud-brick pillars had been covered with layer upon layer of whitewash; on one pillar twenty-nine layers were counted by Madame Casal. Almost certainly this impressive monument was the façade of a temple-palace.

The author at work: Mashuk bears a nal flute.

Gentleness was essential if excavated evidence was to escape damage: so, when the mud-brick colonnade had to be cut (*right*) to allow examination of the structures below, Madame Casal personally directed the strokes of the *kalang-wallah*. On the columns some of the many layers of whitewash can be clearly seen.

*Below:* Using a paint brush our Afghan colleague, Ebrahim, carefully removes the 5,000-years' accumulation of sand which had hidden the black, bright-yellow and white "stepped" diamond motif decoration of this unique vessel. Inside it were found the broken fragments of the rim, which enabled the jar later to be reconstructed.



aged, uncommunicative and seeming to me to have an unpleasant sinister expression with suspicious, narrowed eyes. His mate was Ghulam Saquir, a young man with a ready smile and wearing a faded pink shirt, baggy trousers to match and a black turban.

These four with their special jobs were comparatively easy to remember, but to sort out the rest would take a little time. They were all *tukri-wallahs*, carrying away the earth in their metal bowls and emptying it on to a heap some yards away.

Ginette watched for a while. Suddenly she stopped one lad dressed in patched green garments, with a green-gold cap having a straw-coloured turban bound round it, and a magenta waistcoat embroidered with roses. He was balancing a bowl on his head and making his way slowly along the track to the dump.

"See!" said Ginette, pulling his bowl down to eye level. "He has not got a full *tukri*, he is shirking, that one. You must see that the *shovel-wallahs* fill the bowls and that the men do not take them half full. Always they must throw the earth far, far away. If you do not watch, they walk only a little way—and you must watch every shovel of earth and every time that they use the pick!"

These were problems I had never encountered in England and now I felt I should surely need five pairs of eyes, plus an X-ray machine.

Ginette turned to go; she had many jobs to do in the camp before work on her own site could begin, and panic-stricken I caught her arm.

"At least, please give me a list of words before you go," I begged. "I don't even know what the implements are called and how to say 'stop' or 'start', or anything. . . ."

With a stub of pencil I took down from dictation the mixture of Persian and Pushtu words: *Kabar dar*—take care; *Zut zut*—quickly; *kolang*—pick; *kolang-i-khort*—small pick; *bjel*—shovel; *tukri*—bowl; *sawardar*—basket. . . .

I listed about a dozen words to be going on with. In my tin box I had put a Persian and a Pushtu grammar but somehow neither seemed to have the words I needed and I had no time to study the niceties of grammar and construction while I was working.

Then I was on my own.

At the other end of the mound Achour was sitting on the edge of the hill wrapped in his *chupan* overcoat and incongruously wearing his dazzling white solar topee as he urged his gang to work with ferocious Arabic noises. Maricq was happily scratching away with his knife in the central pit. Both having spent a year in Afghanistan, they could speak fairly fluent Persian, but no Pushtu, which isn't spoken in the north. Ebrahim was still down in the camp making lists of workmen, arranging the pay-roll with Jean-Marie and attending to all the administrative details.

I put on my fiercest expression in an attempt to cover my ignorance and when, after a few inches of digging, we reached the first signs of occupation, I looked diligently in all the passing bowls for pieces of pottery shovelled in by mistake. Most of the men had worked with the expedition in previous seasons and knew that anything, no matter how small, must be shown to the supervisor who decided whether it should be kept ot not. Here we kept literally everything until it had been washed and examined by Jean-Marie, for we were working in the dark, with no similar site to act as a guide.

At ten o'clock when the sun was really fierce, Hashim, wearing an enormous blue apron, meandered up the hill carrying a pitcher and a glass. Water had never been so welcome. The workmen brought buckets of water from the camp for their own use and they were for ever placing them in the angles of excavated walls, spilling the liquid on the earth—a major crime this for it completely altered the texture and appearance of the layers we were trying to analyse, leading to misinterpretation later. A great deal of the supervisor's time seemed to be spent in running round like a nursemaid, urging the casual, light-hearted workmen to tidy up their discarded turbans, boots and outer garments draped around the walls—an untidy "dig" is anathema to the archaeologist.

As the first finds came to light—pieces of broken potsherds, red with black decorations, then buff, with black or violet peepul leaves or cross-hatching, the proud finder would hold them up with a grin and yell hopefully, "*Baksheesh, Khanum Sahib?*" I would answer, "*Insha'llah*—if God be willing". This formula is for almost every occasion and is employed liberally.

We had removed the surface and the top two layers by the time Ebrahim called out "*Khalas!*—Finish!" Tools were flung down in an ecstasy, bowls thrown joyously into the air and the men streamed down the hillside with yells of delight.

There were two baskets full of sherds, each layer having its own labelled basket. Only by clearing one layer at a time and keeping each lot of finds separate could one identify each occupation level. For special finds, objects hard to distinguish from the surrounding soil, such as clay figurines, or difficult to remove undamaged, like copper knives or complete pots, small rewards were given. The finder's name was noted with his discovery and on pay-day he was given anything from one to five Afghanis *baksheesh* (one Afghani was roughly worth fivepence at the then current official rate of exchange).

I had carefully noted every find and its position, and as these had been numerous I seemed to have spent the greater part of the morning making entries in my exercise book, impressing the men and mystifying Achour and Maricq who wanted to know what I found to write about.

In England I had been trained to pinpoint every find of significance, which means most of them; it was only later when Jean-Marie took a look at my book and begged me to stop, that I discovered that here, where the "significant" finds run into hundreds, we would soon fill up all the exercise books if we noted every one. Now I had to learn to distinguish the unusual from the merely significant and for the first few days that seemed to include just about everything.

We stopped work from eleven thirty until half past two and then continued until half past five. That afternoon I noticed that one elderly man in a blue shirt and trousers and black turban managed to carry one half-full bowl to everyone else's two full ones, and to his evident astonishment I pounced on him, standing over him while his bowl was filled to the brim.

I felt flinty-hearted, a veritable Squeers, but it was remarkable how the line speeded up after this incident. One bright character dressed in loose black *qamis* shirt and the baggy *purtak* trousers, relieved only by a faded red triangular charm sewn to the embroidered cap under his faded mauve turban, ostentatiously picked up two bowls at a time and balanced them on his head with a loud "*Khub ast, Khanum Sahib?*" When he was sure that he had my undivided attention, he ran to empty his bowls, happily scattering their contents over the path in his enthusiasm.

In the middle of the afternoon Hashim dragged himself up the slope with another pitcher of water. A gorgeous individual I had noticed before, a tall, well-built man in a pale mauve shirt and baggy trousers embroidered in white, a little gold cap with a pink tassel on his head, watched us for a while with the air of an expert, made some incomprehensible remark about melons and horses and strolled away to see what the other sections were doing.

"What is his name?" I asked the men as he walked off.

"He is Nasruddin, *Khanum*—he is the son of Sultan Mahommed."

So this tall, virile creature was the son of the bent old caretaker who was now engaged in ferrying donkey-loads of water to us from nearby streams!

Down in the camp Jean-Marie was climbing up a rickety ladder to the roof of his cabin with Ebrahim handing up his camera; he was photographing Mound A before the new season's work began on it. Fifty yards away four men were half-way down the deep pit they had been digging all day. A tiny figure emerged from the kitchen, carrying a pail towards the bathroom. It was time to tidy up the dig, to see that there was enough work to last to the end of the afternoon but not too much so that piles of loosened soil had to be left until next day. With a tremendous spurt and loud cries of "*Zut, zut, zher, zher, allez vite!*" the last bowl of earth was emptied at a run and a chorus of cheers welcomed Ebrahim's announcement of "*Kar Khalas!*"

The first day's work was over with no apparent calamities and I crawled down to the camp, exhausted but tolerably satisfied. An awning had been rigged up over the window of the mess and the card table and basket chairs set outside. The wind had dropped, the sun had almost set behind the ragged mountain peaks, and the only sound was the soft humming of a monotonous little tune from Mad Amin as he crouched by the lamps, cleaning and filling them.

Jacques hardly paused to dump his drawing-board before he picked up his gun and went off in search of pigeon or partridge. The rest of us took turns under the shower, ridding ourselves of the penetrating sand. Then relaxed and refreshed, we talked over the day's work as we sat in the cool twilight waiting for Jacques to return. It was "*l'heure du berger*", the blissful hour of the day when we each had our ration of one long, thirst-quenching drink.

Soon after eight o'clock, when supper was finished, everyone disappeared to bed. Throughout the night something startled me awake at every hour—almost it was as though an alarm clock provoked the terrifying cry of a hyena, the violent scratching of some small animal or the hooting of an owl punctually on the hour. It was a relief when it was five o'clock and time to start another day's work.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# *The Wind and the Sand*

THAT FIRST DAY set the pattern for all workdays. We started as soon as it was light, stopped during the fiercest heat of the noonday sun and continued again when it was cooler, finishing just before sunset so that the workmen living in the farthest villages had time to get on the road before dark. If anyone tells you that archaeology in these circumstances is romantic, you may know they're liars.

My gang was beginning to lose its initial shyness and I was beginning to sort them out as individuals. The lad in the black outfit sitting on the edge of the dig with his head thrown back in utter abandon, was singing in a raucous, uninhibited minor key.

"What is your name?" I asked in my best Pushtu.

"I am Sirdar, *Khanum Sahib*, Sirdar, son of Zarin of the village of Sheerga," and he squared his shoulders proudly.

I watched for a while as Ghulam Saquir and Abdul shovelled the loose soil into the metal bowls. The Casals had introduced several words from India, including *sangari*, the scraper, and no doubt future etymologists finding these Hindi words in use in local Afghan villages will have some fascinating theories to account for them.

When the bowls were full, the shovellers would lean on their shovels and watch the *tukri-wallahs* forming a line, either throwing the bowls one to the other, or walking up and down the slope in single file, each carrying a bowl. In the latter event it was not hard for one or two to slack, crawling along so slowly you would have thought they were on their last legs with exhaustion. They tipped the earth away out of sight and then stood gazing dreamily into space, chatting to each other like village women loitering at the well. Finally they would stroll back to pick up a second bowl while their more energetic—or dim-witted—fellows had carried two or three laden bowls.

There were two specially flagrant culprits; one a youth in a patched green shirt, by name Khair Mahmad, and the other a tiny shrimp of a boy in drab khaki waistcoat embroidered with blue roses—there was no mistaking his parentage as he peered shortsightedly from squinting myopic eyes, an air of perpetual bewilderment on his pinched, pallid features. Njamtullah, son of Hassan of Sheerga, was the youngest of the "mouse" brothers and although he swore he was fifteen years old he looked more like an undernourished ten.

Usually the small boys were among the most useful members of the team. There was Ali Gwul, son of Alamaidah of Sheerga, a mischievous, bright-eyed, intelligent urchin who ran twice as far and carried twice as big a load as anyone else. Did the men want more drinking water? Ali Gwul was dispatched to fetch the heavy pail from the camp water supply. Did we run out of baskets to hold the potsherds? It was Ali Gwul who carried a pile of them on his head like a Covent Garden porter as he toiled up the long slope. It was not long before Ali, watching the large second hand on my Rolex and repeating the hours after me, learnt to tell the time and to Ebrahim's evident irritation anticipate his call of *Khalas!* as knocking-off time approached.

We spent the morning removing the thick layer of soft ashes that covered one section of the dig where the houses had been burnt to the ground. It was uncanny to smell the acrid odour of the ashes as fresh as though the place had been consumed only yesterday instead of nearly three thousand years before the birth of Christ. The several feet of ashes showed that at one time this district must have been thickly wooded—today timber was hard to come by and none grew locally.

We were still deep in ashes when Haji Hashim Khan, Governor of Sheerga and the whole valley of Kar Karez, rode up on a sturdy little chestnut mare. A saturnine individual with a high forehead and a slow, secret smile that stopped short of his eyes, he had come to call on Jean-Marie. Most of our workmen came under Haji Hashim Khan's jurisdiction and if he wished he could make our labour problems acute—or he could smooth our path considerably. Now he bent his head with dignity and preceded Jean-Marie through the low doorway of the Casal cabin.

When they emerged the Governor was all smiles. Before riding off, he watched me work for a while, then turned to Ebrahim and said that he must bring us to Sheerga, he would be delighted to entertain us there.

That day I had my first experience of a real sandstorm.

As always in the afternoon, the wind began to rise, dispersing the sullen torpor of the morning. From the top of the mound I watched the birth of a dust-devil as the breeze blew a small pile of sand on to a camel-thorn bush. For a moment or two there would be unobtrusive activity round the bush, and then without warning a column of sand erupted into the air, whirling and dancing erratically across the desert, apparently making for one particular point then suddenly changing direction and veering off at right-angles as though some malignant spirit had been trapped inside. The dust-devils, measuring several yards across the base, rose as high as eighty feet or more and every now and then one of them would dance right across the dig darkening the air until it seemed to fill our very souls with sand.

When this happened and when it was sustained, as it was this afternoon, breathing was agony. One was utterly exhausted by the mere struggle to draw breath. My heart pounded erratically, I felt dizzy and weak, yet I was not even carrying a bowl, only looking on. I say "looking", but even that was an impossibility. There were half a dozen pairs of heavy, rubber-rimmed goggles hanging in the mess and wearing these we could at least keep our eyes open, though the goggles themselves were covered with sand. But the sight of these weird, "space-men" objects would send the workmen into paroxysms of mirth; they had a far simpler solution. They took the long tails of their turbans and wrapped them right across their faces, tucking in the ends. They looked like clay busts swathed in damp cloths awaiting the sculptor's finishing touches, but the turban material kept out the worst of the stinging sand and yet allowed the men to see dimly through the cloth, and go on working.

I wondered why we couldn't be sensible enough to adopt the dress of the country which had obviously evolved over centuries as the most practical for the climate?

After such a morning I would flop on to my string *charpoy* after lunch and listen to the chanting of the more pious members of the villagers as they gathered in the prayer place outlined with discarded potsherds, led in their prayers by Mullah Rapoor. The mullah was a kindly-faced, quiet, bearded man, always dressed in spotless white garments. He worked on the dig like the others—he was just a humble *tukri-wallah*—but he sat apart, never joined in gossip, shared the midday meal with a few workmen from his village and led the prayers at midday and evening. Jean-Marie called him our "resident chaplain" and he did seem to be the Islamic counterpart of the "worker priest". The steady chanting was soothing and, lulled by the murmur, I would fall asleep until someone banged on the cabin door to rouse me from the well of exhaustion and it was time to trail back up the slope under the hot afternoon sun.

The first week sped by quickly. Everything was new to me; yet after that first panic-stricken morning when I had been left on my own, as Jean-Marie had prophesied I had found my feet. Once or twice a day he would come to inspect progress. If I thought I had come up against an unusual or new feature I could send one of the small boys to fetch him, and his very confidence in me gave me back my own. One morning I paused to puzzle out the meaning of the layers I was uncovering. That is another worry for the amateur. There never seems to be time to think; somebody, usually a poverty-stricken Museum, is financing your labours, somebody is paying for a full working day from the workmen. It's your job to see that full value is given for money, so that the men must be kept working and not hanging around while you puzzle out what you're doing. Therefore you have to think up some minor jobs that can be carried on while you try to follow floors or walls—an impossible task unless you know what you're doing to begin with.

On this particular day I had been removing a layer of burnt debris and ashes below which had appeared a wall embedded with arrowheads and one bronze spearhead. "Mouse" Bismullah, the wall expert, had been summoned from Mound A to sweep and scrape and find a fine straight wall.

At this point we both began to entertain doubts. Working in mud pisé it is too easy to invent a wall, especially if you feel there ought to be one in that spot. It is equally easy to destroy one without noticing until it is too late—sun-dried mud brick is not quite so difficult if it is in good condition—burnt brick is unmistakable.

This time our wall was proved authentic; it linked up with others in a series of rooms. And one piece of pottery found near the surface gave this room a significance above the rest. The potsherds appeared to be quite plain and, like all the plain pieces, it was put in the basket marked with the date and exact layer and place of discovery. That evening, when the washed sherds were laid out for Jean-Marie's inspection, the basket from the top of the layer was seen to contain a decorated sherd and that of a type not found before on this site. Any new pattern is exciting, it may be "significant", it may point towards a whole new culture. My piece had a pattern of a crescent with a hatched design and some kind of a bird.

"It is an ostrich," announced Jean-Marie firmly—the sherd was broken just where the identifying legs should have been.

"No, no, it is a partridge," affirmed Jacques, combing his beard with his fingers.

Ginette was convinced it was a turkey; the only thing we all agreed upon was that this was some kind of a feathered creature and the first we had found on the site. Then someone recalled the purple birds painted on the "goblets" found last season on Mound A. Was this the same kind of bird?

Usually when plant or animal life is depicted on prehistoric ware it is inspired by local vegetation and wild life. The birds on the drinking vessels looked like turkeys so perhaps they had originally come from Iran where turkeys were plentiful? Achour pointed out that the "turkeys" had no tails. "Female turkeys, then?" I guessed. "But turkeys are supposed to have come from North America," I added.

"Yes, but when? That was in the sixteenth century A.D. when sailors brought the turkey from North America to Europe," said

Jean-Marie. "We are talking of maybe five thousand years ago, not five hundred. Perhaps turkeys did go from Asia to North America with the Red Indians . . . these could have come from Central Asia. . . ."

The discussion went on—did it really matter what kind of a bird the potter had portrayed? Yes, because if that particular bird was no longer to be found in this part of the world or never had been indigenous, it must have been brought here by the builders of Mundigak and that in turn might give us a clue as to their origin.

Every archaeologist is a detective, finding and interpreting clues that may date back thousands of years—maybe that's the answer to folk who ask "*Why*—why put up with all this discomfort? Why work yourself to exhaustion, what's the point of it all?"

It's the love of the chase, the eternal questing after knowledge, the challenge to one's wits, one's will power and ingenuity that make so many of us punish ourselves in this curious fashion.

Meanwhile on every other site on the dig it seemed that people were turning up much more exciting finds than my piece of broken potsherd and the few odds and ends such as the cornelian bead which Sirdar had spotted, Abdul's pestle and mortar and half of a black marble bowl. There was too a minute blue bead no bigger than a grain of sugar. Ginette was finding seals, Ebrahim and Jacques found figurines by the bowlful—but my site seemed barren and I was worried lest the workmen were tipping useful objects away with the earth or, worse still, concealing them to sell later in Kandahar bazaar.

We got all the news of finds elsewhere from Nasruddin's daily visits. Resplendent in unsullied garments of palest lavender, for he never soiled his hands or garments in manual labour, Nasruddin would tour the site after his initial morning task of handing out tools to the workmen. At night he would check their return but in between he had nothing to do but boost our morale.

As he strolled to the edge of a work place he would be greeted with eager cries of: "*Stare mahshe, khush hal ye, tazeh ye, takrah ye, khwar mahshe, jor ye, sala mahtye, pak kherye. . . .*" "May you never be tired; are you happy? Are you well? May you never be hungry. . . ." The greetings could and did go on for several minutes, some calling in Pushtu, others in Persian, inquiring after the newcomer's health, happiness, strength, freshness of body, state of mind, hoping he was neither hungry nor thirsty and that all the members of his family were in good health.

The preliminary responses over—and nobody waits for the answers for both parties are busy making their greetings simultaneously—the news of the day would be exchanged. Khair-ullah was ill, his brother had come to take his place; Usman was getting married, there would be an all night feast in his village and he would take three days' holiday; Haji Mahmad's sister had died giving birth to a son, but of course she was quite old, at least twenty-six. . . .

Then, settling himself in the shade of a wall, Nasruddin would lift up his light, pleasant voice and sing, a performance always regarded with respect by the workmen and greeted with approving cries of: "*Wah, wah, basyar khub ast, khor!*" "Encore, very good indeed, truly!"

Graciously acknowledging the applause, Nasruddin would bring out a roasted corn on the cob, first offering a piece to me; or perhaps it would be a slice of melon or a pomegranate. The pomegranates were a speciality of the district, large, round shiny-red fruit with dark-red or pale-yellow seeds, bursting with juice. They were refreshing on a hot day and their slightly tart flavour was faintly reminiscent of loganberries—I adored them; so did the workmen and I had to spend all my time explaining again and again that the spitting of pomegranate seeds and their skins into the dig was strictly forbidden.

Talking of food, when Friday arrived, Ginette decided to give us a treat. The wooden store cupboard was opened for the first time since our arrival and we looked inside expectantly. There were the tins of delicacies to supplement the rather plain local diet but not a label remained on a single tin! Every one had been nibbled off by mice! So that explained the scratching and nibbling we had heard but been unable to trace.

That left us with a lucky dip for our titbits.

"Do you suppose this can be peas, or is it sausage—or perhaps fruit?" Ginette would ask hopefully holding out a shiny, anonymous tin. We would all make a guess, trying to judge from the shape and size of the tin, but we were invariably wrong, so that the can of fruit we looked forward to for our dessert would turn out to be baked beans, and the peas, produced when Kandahar market failed us with any kind of fresh vegetable, more often than not would turn into stewed plums.

Because I never completely got over my fears of strange beasties in the cabin, night was the worst time for me. I didn't care what there was outside, although Maricq's optimistic attempts to improve his English conversation by standing outside my window to chat every night, invariably after I had just got into bed, had its moments, particularly since he never seemed to realize that at four thousand feet up in clear desert air, every word of a conversation carries for miles and ours provided entertainment for the entire camp.

I could handle something my own size—it was spiders that really terrified me no matter how logically I reasoned with myself nor how fascinated I tried to become by studying their diverse habits. Needless to say the small boys in the camp soon discovered my weakness. They didn't bring spiders, thank goodness, but *meerghrae*, the giant ants of Mundigak, creatures at least an inch and a half long, and they bit, very hard. When life grew dull on the dig, Ali Gwul or one of his companions would provoke a gratifying response from me by producing one of these ants and placing it unseen on my person, waiting for the cry as I was unexpectedly bitten.

When I pointed out that as I was a woman it was not nice for them to do this they agreed with ominous alacrity. No more ants, but instead they collected obnoxious little black and white striped beetles which they called *khuzdukis*, and these too bit. In view of my hobby it was rather unfortunate that I had to conquer a feeling of hysteria every time I saw a spider, dead or alive, that moths, particularly big ones, terrified me and that I had a passion for hot, tropical countries where these creatures flourish.

What I didn't mind at all were the dusty little lizards they called *margujas*. They were only two or three inches long and darted like baby flashes of lightning over the dusty ground.

It was after he had been chasing lizards one hot afternoon while the men were wielding their picks that Sirdar sighed and flung himself exhausted across the wall on which we were working. His body completely obstructed the path, but not bothering to disturb him I stepped across his recumbent form.

Immediately there was an outcry. Feeling my shadow across him and the swish of my passing, Sirdar clutched at the triangular charm on his cap and went quite purple in the face, groaning and writhing on top of the wall and assuring me he was going to be very ill.

Everyone else stopped work and looked gravely across at us. At first I thought they were pulling my leg, then that Sirdar was insulted because a woman had stepped across him. When finally I did get some coherent speech from the men I gathered they were quite sure that the very act of stepping across a man automatically doomed a member of his family to die in the near future, or at the very best, a serious illness was in store for Sirdar himself.

"What can I do?" I asked, willing to make amends if possible. "I did not know, I did not mean to harm him!"

Well, there *was* a cure, they admitted. Apprehensively I listened, afraid this was going to involve me in a pilgrimage or something complicated, but it was simple. All I had to do was to step back again over Sirdar, thus undoing the spell I had cast upon him.

There were audible sighs of relief as I solemnly stepped back again and Sirdar sat up, still clutching his charm, the other hand upon his heart. With a perfectly grave face he proceeded to thank me for saving his life!

I sighed as I went back to work. Archaeology in Afghanistan held more hazards than any professor had ever hinted at in far-off London.

* * * *

Bismullah sat in a corner studying his sharp little features in a mirror set in the lid of a small tin box. He spent a great deal of time trimming his moustache and wispy fringe of beard with my nail scissors and a lot more time helping to shave the other men with a terrifying-looking clasp-knife. The mirror-lidded box came in handy for this operation too—nearly all the men had one in which to keep their *naswar*, a mixture of dark green tobacco leaves rubbed to a fine powder and mixed with a little *chunam*—lime. The men would tip about a teaspoonful into their palms and toss it into their open mouths, chew for a few seconds then park the mixture like chewing gum between their lips and gums. Bakyir urged me to try some.

"It is very good for this, *Khanum*," he assured me, pointing to his eyes.

Bismullah joined in. "Yes, very good for eyes when you are doing this," and he began scraping the floor of the pit with his metal scraper, raising the usual clouds of fine sand. Chewing the *naswar* probably releases some soothing fumes down the throat and up the nostrils and makes the eyes water protectively. I tried a pinch of the green powder and gasped for breath, to the delight of the men.

Mad Amin, crouching over a shawl spread on the ground and covered with the small green leaves that he had left to dry in the sun, made his own. He bought his tobacco leaves in Kandahar and rubbed them between his palms until they crumbled into a fine powder. Like most growing things in the East the leaves seemed to be midgets compared with their counterparts from other parts of the world but there was no doubt that *naswar*, apart from the eye cures, was highly thought of for its digestive properties. When the wind was very fierce, the men would bring out their boxes, take a pinch of *naswar* and then, peering into the mirrors, outline their eyes with *khol*. This combination of chewing *naswar* and rimming their eyes with soot gathered from candles and lamps was, they claimed, a sure protection against the sand-laden wind.

To make trebly certain, they wore a *tawiz* or charm sewn on to their caps and hung over one eye in rakish fashion. The *tawiz* usually consisted of a piece of paper on which a mullah had written a verse from the Holy Koran. The paper was then sewn up in a scrap of material, usually red and often edged with blue china beads.

Ginette had a more practical cure for eye troubles and every evening after work she would have a long queue of patients waiting for her to administer eye-drops as they lay prone on the ground with the air of submitting to some major operation.

I even had a patient of my own.

I was busy one morning scraping and brushing my site with far more diligence than I could ever manage in my own home, trying to follow the floor of an ancient dwelling house, when there was a chorus of "*Asp* (A horse), *Khanum Sahib, asp ast!*"

Their keen eyes had spotted a minute speck moving across the desert and after another fifteen minutes the speck resolved itself into a handsome, black-haired Kuchhi with dusty-pink, knee-length smock, the neck, cuffs and hems all intricately embroidered with wide bands of mirror work. He reined in his sturdy brown horse and watched me working. He had heard about the "hospital" and wanted medical attention—no, *Khanum*, it was not for himself but for his horse!

This was a poser, but I hated to send him away without trying to do something—there might be a chance of getting a ride in the future.

"Tell him to come back when we finish work tonight," I said, and after a little hesitation the Kuchhi walked away leading his horse to Mound A where he launched a similar appeal to Ginette.

At lunch time the Kuchhi appeared in the camp, parking himself outside the Casals' door, and Jean-Marie, rushing out of the cabin, fell over his squatting figure.

"What does this man want?" Jean-Marie asked Ebrahim. It had been a trying morning and visitors were not very welcome during working days.

"He says his horse is sick and he wants you to cure it."

"*Ah, ça alors*—tell him to go away. This is not a veterinary hospital; we have enough with human beings to look after. . . ."

But the Kuchhi was not to be so easily discouraged. He led his horse out of sight and hid round the back of a mound until at half-past four he emerged to spend the next hour waiting patiently by my site. After work was finished he followed me down to the camp. He certainly was good looking, I thought, glancing at his thick, dark hair and bright eyes. Ginette was bandaging a gash on Ramazan's hand where the pick had slipped, and the Kuchhi, standing a little apart, watched wistfully.

"He has come a very long way," said Ebrahim in a stage whisper. "It is a pity for this poor man to go back many miles—his horse has a sore back."

I lifted off the saddle with its gay tasselled fringe and inspected the sore.

Ginette looked up from Ramazan's hand. "Well, if you like to do it you can use permanganate of potash—there is plenty in the box," she conceded. "That is what we used with the camels in Africa."

The Kuchhi was visibly impressed by the purple liquid I dabbed on to the deep, open wound and through Ebrahim I explained that he must not ride the horse until the sore was healed. "Bring it back for more medicine," I told him. Then I added—"Please, ask if I can borrow his horse for a ride when the saddle-sore is healed."

The Kuchhi nodded his agreement with a smile, and spoke to Ebrahim.

"He says he would like us to go and take tea with him in his camp—it is about eight miles from here. Soon he will move on to Kandahar to sell his sheep. . . ."

Eight miles! It was much too far for us to go on foot and trips in the station wagon were not encouraged: petrol was rationed, besides being very expensive.

The man had picked up the reins of orange, red and blue tassels and was already moving away, leading his horse towards the setting sun. Ebrahim looked at my despondent features and tried to comfort me.

"Perhaps they will bring their camp more close, perhaps they will not yet go to Kandahar."

## CHAPTER NINE

# *Skirts on Fridays*

NASRUDDIN WAS RECLINING like a Pasha in the shade of the mud walls while we slaves toiled away under the burning sun. It was the last day of the first week's work, and every now and then our onlooker would sing to us, exchanging light banter with the men between whiles. Now he paused to ask my age.

Since I could only count up to twenty in Pushtu I finished by holding up my fingers.

Nasruddin replied with a similar display that gave him thirty years—"with two wives," he added proudly.

"And how many children?" I inquired.

"Alas, none, but one wife is new; I have only just taken her. Insha'Allah, she will bear me fine sons."

Mashuk, my good-looking, poverty-stricken lad with the film-star smile, good teeth and curly, light-brown hair, butted in.

"Of course there are already daughters," he explained. I had forgotten that daughters did not count as children in this Islamic quarter of the world.

Mashuk's garments were always in ribbons, threatening to drop off if he wielded his pick too strenuously, and now he was clumsily sewing up a particularly large rent in the seat of his *purtak* trousers, having borrowed needle and cotton from me.

"But have you no mother to do that for you?" I asked.

"Mother is dead; sisters all dead. One last sister dead yesterday—she was having a baby," he added.

I looked at him suspiciously. He was excessively cheerful as he bit off the end of the long cotton thread—was he pulling my leg?

"Well, why don't you get married?" I asked.

Mashuk showed his even white teeth in a broad smile.

"Too much money," he explained. "Here one wife costs eight hundred Afghanis (£20)."

"—But in Kabul a wife will cost twice as much," put in Nasruddin, complacent at the thought of his own two wives for the price of one.

Sirdar pulled off his *kulla* cap and turban to scratch a fringe of hair round his tonsured skull. Bismullah had shaved his head and the result was hardly flattering although probably clean and cool. He was about to add his own comments on married life when our attention was diverted by the sound of a faint hum that might have been a grumbling bee far, far away. Tools were dropped as the men peered into the clear sky towards the gap in the mountains to the west.

They waved their arms excitedly and pointed to the sky. An aeroplane was an event, even though you couldn't see it. Everyone vied to point it out to me but search as I might I could not find the remotest speck in the sky. But their eyesight, despite the sandstorms, was fantastically keen. "There—there, it is going to the sun," they told me.

They appeared to be waiting for some authoritative pronouncement from me—after all, they knew from our conversations that I had arrived by plane.

"It is going to England," I told them confidently and added for good measure, "to my home."

They were suitably impressed and Sirdar said would I please send his salaams to my parents and a special message to tell them that he, Sirdar, would be coming back with me. Would he have to wear European clothes, he asked. Had I sisters he could marry? That would be good. No unmarried sisters? That was a pity, but well, if I myself would not marry him, would I please marry somebody else and have a daughter he could marry when she grew up.

"Then, *Khanum Sahib*, you would be my mother-in-law and I would kiss your hands and you could kiss my cheeks!"

As a first step towards this desirable state of affairs he brought me a bunch of slightly forlorn white and yellow chrysanthemums, all bitten off short at the stem.

Next he wanted to know if I had any brothers. I told him no.

"Then I will be your brother if you will become Mussalman. To be Mussalman is good. Is it not good? If you are not Mussalman then when you are dead you will be eaten by *khuzduki*" (he knew how I detested the striped beetles that bit), "but if you are Mussalman then when you die you will meet all your friends again. It is good to be Mussalman. If you become Mussalman I will give you five *chadris*!"

And under instruction from the whole gang I was taught the *Kalima*, the Islamic creed. *La illah, illa Allah, Mahommed da rasil ullah.* . . . "There is one God and Mahommed is his Prophet. . . ." Thereafter, every now and then one of the men would break off work to grasp a shovel or a pick and pretend to threaten me with it, putting on a fierce expression and demanding, "*Tu Mussalman ast, Mussalman ast? Kalima bogu.* . . ."—"Are you a Mussalman? Then repeat the *Kalima*." And when I hastily recited the Kalima they would relax with broad grins. "*Yeh khub ast, Khanum Sahib*—that is good," they approved.

This piece of by-play was the nearest I ever came to seeing the so-called fierce religious fanaticism of Afghan tribesmen, although to be sure I imagined that such gabbling by an unbeliever would have deserved a speedy and horrible death. True enough the Prophet Mahommed did teach tolerance towards Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews—"the people of the Book", who followed written teachings inspired by God. The men seemed proud of my efforts at reciting the *Kalima* although I was much less successful when I attempted to explain my own religion to them. Moses, Joseph, Jacob—Musa, Yussuf, Yakub of the Koran—yes, these were prophets accepted by Islam, but Jesus (Isa), was also a prophet, like the other holy men of God. He was the Son of God, they agreed, but are we not all "sons of God"?

Four handsome, bearded mullahs came visiting us from Aroorkh. The village had only one mosque but apparently between them the four mullahs served other hamlets too. As soon as they arrived on the site, squatting on the edge of the dig to watch us, I was urged to recite the *Kalima* to them. Now for certain the mullahs would disapprove of a foreigner, a Christian and a woman shameless enough to work among men, unveiled; for such a one to recite the *Kalima* would be tantamount to blasphemy! Reluctantly I did as the men urged and to my amazement and relief the mullahs beamed approvingly.

The four mullahs who were rarely separated, visited us at least once a week after this. One of them, tall, young and handsome, announced amid giggles from the others that he would come with me to England, and he insisted on solemnly writing down his name for me—Shah Wali Khan. In preparation for this visit he would come to the dig armed with a sheet of crumpled paper divided into three columns; in the first he had written a list of words in Persian script, in the next Ebrahim had written the Persian equivalent in Roman script and the third column was left blank for me to write in the English—"hand, foot, rice, sky, sun, moon . . .". Essential vocabulary for a traveller!

Once more I thought of all that I had read and heard of the traditionally "fanatical" mullahs of Afghanistan; the friendliness of these and others I met during my stay, came as the greater surprise. Oddly enough while the mullahs never objected to my bare arms (for sometimes in the midday heat I would roll up my sleeves or wear a short-sleeved blouse) I received many a lecture from the workmen on this issue.

"This is good, like this is good?"—"*Yeh khub ast, mislazi khub ast?*" Sirdar would demand emphatically, pulling up the long loose sleeves of his tunic or the baggy legs of his *purtak* to point to his own arms and legs.

After being surrounded by men who covered all but their faces and ankles, the sight of so much bare flesh did seem rather shocking and I could appreciate their sense of revulsion at seeing Europeans in vests and shorts.

Occasionally a little group of villagers would appear on the plain below the mounds, taking the track towards Kandahar or Shah Maqsud, the womenfolk shrouded always in the black shawls that took the place of the expensive, more sophisticated *chadri*. They would be riding on the donkeys while their menfolk walked by their sides, a pleasant reversal of the usual Eastern custom. The sight of these groups would set Sirdar off again on the subject of purdah. I should wear a *chadri* or the *chaddah*—(shawl), he urged. I would try to demonstrate in mime the difficulties that would arise if I attempted to work in such a garment and everyone would agree that perhaps this would create difficulties. Eventually we compromised.

"*Inja tu halak ast—anja*" (pointing to the camp), "*Juma, tu Khanum ast.*" And so it was agreed. On the dig in my jeans and shirt I was a boy but on Fridays in the camp I could become a girl.

And sure enough, Friday proved to be the only day I could really relax and be feminine.

Knocking-off time on Thursday evenings was always half-an-hour earlier than other days to allow time for the men to collect their pay and be home before dark. With the first syllable of "*Khalas*", the *tukris* were thrown into the air with wild shrieks of joy and like Red Indians on the warpath the men streamed down the sides of the two mounds and gathered round the table at the back of the cabins where Jean-Marie was sitting with the pay ready stacked in small heaps.

Mullah Rapoor and a few of the more pious villagers washed faces, hands and feet quickly and said their prayers before joining the majority of the men already squatting round the table. On the fringe of the crowd a small boy from my gang (he had the charming name of Khuda-i-Dad, "Gift-of-God") played a wistful air on a reed flute as Ebrahim called out the names one by one—worker's name, father's name and village, for so many had the same name. One by one the men walked up to collect their pay supplemented by *baksheesh* if they had worked extra well and found special treasures—depleted by fines if they had slacked too obviously.

As the sun sank behind Mound B, casting long shadows across the camp, the men wrapped their shawls round their heads and hastened off in twos and threes down the footpaths to their various villages.

One Friday afternoon I changed my skirt for a pair of jeans and together with Achour, hitched a lift on the backs of old Sultan Mahommed's donkeys. Sultan had just delivered a load of water to the camp and was off again in the direction of Aroorkh, for a refill.

Aroorkh had always looked cool and inviting when I had glimpsed it from a distance while out shooting with Jacques and Achour. Now we walked through twisty lanes between high mud-pisé walls shaded by glossy-leaved pomegranate, walnut and almond trees. But not a soul was in sight! It seemed a dead village yet we were uncomfortably aware of being watched. Now and then as we strolled along, Achour or I would suddenly turn our heads, hoping to catch a glimpse of the elusive inhabitants whom we felt were close by. But not even the four mullahs were to be seen. We were in a ghost village till suddenly we turned a corner and glimpsed two small girls darting through a doorway. We had caught them unawares and they had had no time to snatch up a bundle left lying in the middle of the path. The bundle stirred and I lifted the edge of a shawl to find a tiny baby lying face down, crying like some small, deserted animal. Should I pick it up or would my touch convince the villagers I had put the evil eye on it? One of the small girls was peering fearfully round the doorway and I made a dash for her and grabbed a trembling arm.

"Tell her to take the baby," I said to Khuda-i-Dad.

He murmured something to the girl who snatched up the baby feet first and shot back into the doorway.

"*Mariz ast,*" said "Gift-of-God" briefly. "It is ill, but it is only a girl baby, no good!"

We walked on. The lane opened to reveal a patch of grass by a stream, shaded by mulberry trees. Fat-tailed sheep cropped contentedly in the dappled shadows and two men in dusty garments the colour of crushed strawberries, bulky black turbans on their heads, squatted in the sun beside a blue cloth covered with golden grain. A small girl in a grubby white gown played with the hand-held scales, and behind the little group, in a hollow filled with a burst of greenery, nestled a small thatched mud hut, a flour mill whose stone querns were turned by a water wheel driven by the fast-running stream.

Just round the bend of the lane the houses petered out and there in the square of waste ground enclosed by mud walls sprawled the low black tents of the Kuchhis.

Achour stood by the entrance to the enclosure and took the precaution of calling to "his" Kuchhi, a man temporarily employed on the dig. We could see the heavy-shouldered mastiffs that guarded the camp curled in the scanty shade of the tents. The sleepiness of the community was broken by the sudden aggressive barking of the watch-dogs as they heard Achour's voice and by the stirring of the recumbent figures under the shade of the goat-felt blankets. Running, Achour's workman silenced the dogs and greeted us with surprised pleasure, obviously never dreaming that we would really accept his invitation to what he described as "a very poor camp, very poor!"

It was, too, but as the first Kuchhi encampment I had ever visited, it was fascinating to have a close-up of life in these Arab-like tents. They were made from strips of black felt woven from goat's hair by the women and sewn together to form wide bands of material. These were spread over a low wicker framework and in very hot weather the sides of the tent would be raised up on slender poles. When the unpleasant sand-laden winds, or the icy winds of winter started blowing, the tents would be closed in the direction of the prevailing winds or the sides let down completely at night. Today the tents were open on three sides, the dropped ends being stacked with the bundles of carpets and clothes that formed the sole baggage of the nomads. An old man with bright blue eyes lay on a rug in the sun outside one tent. Seeing my camera he propped himself on one arm and begged me to take his photograph, turning his side towards me as he did so. The rest of the family joined in his pleas—my "X-Ray" machine would cure him, they were certain!

X-rays in the desert! Where had they come across such a thing? Then I realized that Kuchhis saw more of the world than ordinary Afghan villagers—they wandered from the far north, right down into Pakistan. They could have encountered X-rays in Quetta, Peshawar, or any of the bigger cities. And if they mistook the actual function of the X-ray camera, who could blame them?

A sharp-featured old woman in dusty black garments was busy making bread in the opening of her tent, slapping the rounds of dough on to the sides of an earthen jar sunk into the ground, and removing them, puffed and golden, ready to eat, a few moments later. A young woman strolled by, apparently unaware of our presence, leading a fat-tailed *dhumba* sheep on a string. Suddenly both caught sight of us and took fright together, the girl still clutching the sheep as they leapt over guy ropes and bundles of bedding and dozing watch-dogs roused to barking activity.

Panic died down and now crying babies were produced for us to examine and cure. I produced my small first-aid kit, some Vaseline, aspirins, and eye-drops, and did my harmless best, and gradually the Kuchhis lost their shyness and crowded round as we clicked away with our cameras.

A small tug at Achour's shirt reminded us that Khuda-i-Dad was still with us, hopping with impatience.

We turned from a group of tall, blue-eyed Kuchhis, with their swaggering poise and bold arrogance, and allowed "Gift-of-God" to lead us in a short cut to his home. Over fields and walls and through gardens we followed him to a large house standing in a cul-de-sac. Great orange pumpkins soaked up the hot sunshine on the roof, like round, greedy sponges, and Khuda-i-Dad left us to dash into the shadow of a tall, whitewashed archway. We could hear his excited voice as he cried to the hidden inmates of the household and a few moments later a shawled figure appeared, hovering uncertainly under the archway, and Khuda-i-Dad rushed out to beckon us eagerly.

"Come," he called, "this is my mother, she is wanting to meet you."

She was slim, looked about sixty and was probably thirty, and she walked forward a few steps to clasp both my hands in hers, pulling me through the archway into a courtyard shaded by a mulberry tree. A younger woman with a ready grin, attractive in spite of an almost entire lack of teeth, joined in the greetings. She was Khuda-i-Dad's aunt and now we had to recount the day's adventures through "Gift-of-God's" interpretation

Gradually the courtyard filled with children, all girls, followed at last by a tall, dignified figure, a white-bearded ancient whom I supposed to be Khuda-i-Dad's grandfather. Not at all, he was his father!

Came another surprise—would we take their photo? For an Afghan to suggest a photo of his womenfolk is extraordinary, but who was I to argue? Only Auntie backed out with a giggle, her hand over her toothless mouth, objecting that she was not beautiful enough for a picture.

Then: "We have but one child," mourned the old man, laying his hand on Khuda-i-Dad's head.

I looked around at the half a dozen little girls. "And whose are these?" I asked politely.

"Oh yes, those are mine," the old man agreed, dismissing unimportant daughters with a glance. "But I have only one son. Tell me, *Khanum Sahib*, tell me how to have more sons?"

"Yes, tell us *Khanum Sahib*, what must we do to have more sons?" Auntie and wife pressed my hands in urgent pleas.

I was flattered by their faith but what kind of answer does one give? I pointed to the sky rather pompously and said, "Pray to Allah, He alone knows how to give sons . . ." a reply that was agreed as good advice although I sensed a certain disappointment in my failure to produce a really spectacular charm.

But despite their disappointment, the family urged us to stay for a meal and even when we finally made it clear we must go, they refused to let us leave empty-handed. Khuda-i-Dad had to take off his turban and fill it with almonds and pomegranates to carry back for us.

## CHAPTER TEN

# *Potsherds and Palaces*

WHAT DID THE workmen think of our activities? Did they, like the three sophisticated clerks from Kandahar who had visited us on their way to the shrine of Shah Maqsud, believe us to be treasure hunters?

"Where is the gold, what do you do with the money that you find?" they had insisted.

There was no doubt that the majority of the men were just as mystified and Sirdar was clearly voicing the thoughts of his fellows when, after watching Ali Gwul stumble down the mound bearing his fourth basketful of potsherds, he demanded to know what we did with them.

We send them to Kabul, I told him.

Sirdar's heavily wrinkled brow cleared. "Ah then, it is true, in Kabul the white *tikka* (potsherd) is ground into flour and the red *tikka* to chocolate? Truly there is never enough to eat in Kabul," he added knowingly. "Thanks be to God, here is always sufficient to eat." Who had been pulling his leg so effectively, I wondered? The feeding problems of Kabul were forgotten for the moment in the problems that MG.B.26 was presenting. Every site was numbered and this number, together with the number and description of the level being worked, was written on every basket of pottery and eventually on every find that was kept. A piece of pottery carelessly dropped into the wrong basket could cause endless confusion and headaches. For example, in the *monument massif* of the eleventh layer of Mound A a somewhat inartistic red pottery with purely geometrical designs was found. With hardly any noticeable gap in digging, one came to the *monument colonnade* on top of which the heavier structure had been built. The *monument colonnade* had been suddenly and violently destroyed by attackers, probably the builders of the *monument massif* and the creators of the coarse pottery. They were obviously an entirely different people from those who had made the graceful buff "brandy balloons" similar to the Kulli-ware of Baluchistan and that of the Indus Valley, pottery that was tentatively dated at the second half of the third millennium.

Now supposing a considerable number of the buff sherds had been found among the later coarse red ones, this could imply a mingling of the two cultures and a gradual absorption of one into the other. Or it might mean that someone on the dig had been careless in labelling baskets just at the time of transition from one layer to the next, and had mixed the two levels. Supposing the red pottery had been found among the buff of the earlier layer? The confusion that this must arouse can best be visualized by imagining that you were exploring the ruins of a bombed council house in London just after the war. If you found a seventeenth-century coin you might assume with good reason that (a), the victim of the air raid had been a numismatist, or (b) that the house had been built on the site of a much older one from whose foundations had come the coin, or (c) that it had even been dropped by a careless present-day passer-by.

Supposing you were digging a Saxon burial mound and had gone through a foot or so of obviously undisturbed soil and there among the warrior's bones and the weapons and sherds of funerary pottery in your finds basket, you discovered a piece of a Picasso dish! Knowing your site you would assume that someone must have deliberately "planted" the twentieth-century sherd in the ground, or carelessly dropped it in the wrong basket. But imagine how confusing this sort of thing can be when you are digging a completely unknown, undated site!

As Sir Mortimer Wheeler once said, "Pottery is the alphabet of archaeology" and, in order to read the language it spells, it is absolutely essential to keep the finds of each level completely separate.

Because of the size of the excavations and the lack of trained help, Jean-Marie had a suspicion that some of the pottery from Mound B had been mixed up, and that some of the layers had been missed in the previous season's work. So we were going very slowly and carefully and on my site finding quite a lot of sherds that seemed to confirm Monsieur Casal's fears. We were also finding some unexpected architectural features.

Every day there seemed to be fresh floors, hearths, doorways blocked up, windows enlarged, walls pulled down with others built across them. Now, nearing the bottom, we came to a small foyer from which opened two doorways, one to a street, one to a staircase. Then in a narrow wall at the back of the foyer, came signs that originally there had been another doorway here. Outside the front door of the house ran a street with an excellent hard surface. In fact, as we swept and scraped and dug a little farther, there appeared to be two surfaces, one a couple of inches above the other and forming outside the house a kind of platform extending about four-fifths of the way across the main street. This platform, at the end of the street (at least, the end so far as our section of excavation was concerned, for it obviously continued under the so-far untouched portion of the mound), had been covered by some four feet of acrid-smelling ashes. This must have been the outer edge of the little community, where buildings on the perimeter had been attacked and destroyed presumably at the same time as the attack on the colonnaded monument on Mound A.

While the men cleared the last of the ashes, throwing the laden *tukris* to each other with enthusiastic cries of "*Ee-y-allah, ee-y-allah!*" (usually the louder and faster the cries, the slower and more lethargic the throwing), I was clearing the road surface with a hand-pick, a knife and a brush.

There was a round soft patch the size of half-a-crown in the surface at one point and it proved to be a small hole filled with soft earth. I spooned it out carefully, looking in vain for signs of decayed wood or ash, which might have indicated that this had been a post hole, though admittedly an exceedingly small one. If there had been posts here to hold up a thatched roof, the precious wooden poles had been removed when the building was abandoned. I thought at first that this might have been a little shelter erected over a street stall. Then a few inches away a second hole appeared, and then a third.

Now there was great enthusiasm to help me, but this was something I preferred to tackle alone, as it was only too easy for holes to be invented by over-energetic scratching. At last I had discovered some eighteen holes, each three or more inches deep. There were only a few inches between each hole and they formed a rough "S" or "Z". As soon as the men saw them they were unanimous in their verdict. Producing smoothly-rounded pebbles they started flicking them into the holes. "See," said Ali Gwul with a grin, "this game we play today in our homes!"

To give Bismullah a chance to trace the walls of the foyer, we moved now to the site where Achour had begun work and from which he had been shifted before reaching the virgin soil. One of the difficulties on a dig is to find jobs to occupy everybody all the time, for there are often occasions when a gang has to stop work while one or two specialists continue on more delicate jobs. Nobody enjoys finishing off a job begun by someone else and there were a lot of grumbles as we moved away.

We had been unlucky on MG.B.26. Ebrahim on his neighbouring site had found what we supposed must be a fertility goddess, although it was made with only pinched-out wings or stumps for arms, a straight stem for a body and no legs at all. All that *we* had retrieved, apart from pottery and doorstones, had been broken bull figurines and beads. True Mashuk had found a little jar, perfect and unbroken, with a Quetta-type pattern on it (a geometrical design of dark purple-black on buff, first found at sites near Quetta in Baluchistan and thus providing the "type" for all similar designs). Now I hoped that on our new site we might have some good finds, for as morale boosters they helped tremendously in speeding up work.

However, the men were disgruntled; they felt they had been hard done by and work was going painfully slowly. In a spasm of impatience I joined the line of men standing on top of the walls, and started throwing the laden bowls of earth myself, speeding up the pace.

Throwing bowls like this on the level was easy and quite pleasant—throwing from the bottom of the dig up to someone on top of the wall was quite a different matter and called for sturdy shoulder muscles like those of Sirdar. The effect of my participation was electrifying. The younger men took it all as a great joke, but the older men showed their perturbation, for no longer could they pretend that the weight of the metal bowls was beyond their strength. With great solicitude they begged me to stop. One man dragged up a wicker basket and turned it upside down for me to sit on. They urged me to rest, to shield my arms from the sun, and never, never to exert myself by lifting laden bowls.

From my position on the wall I caught sight of a thin edge of pottery sticking out from the side, and after a little scraping I managed to extract the two halves of a flat dish of strong red pottery with a black peepul leaf—wild fig—design. The red and black were very loose, rubbing off when the sherd was dampened. The dish had a small rim round the edge and a stem broken off inside in the middle, almost like a cakestand turned upside down. It was the first time we had found so complete a dish of this type and there is always a thrill in making such a find, even though you know perfectly well it is just a matter of luck whether you or someone else happens to be digging in that particular spot. The dish was followed by the discovery of a small, unbroken vase and at the end of the day we were quite pleased with ourselves.

Meanwhile on MG.B.26 Bismullah, with Njamtullah helping him to clear away the loose soil, had uncovered the first two of a flight of steps leading from one of the doorways. The steps, fairly wide and deep in tread, turned in a spiral and here it seemed was the answer to one of our mysteries. At some time after the staircase had been built, probably leading up to the flat roof, the upper part had been deliberately destroyed and the debris levelled to take the weight of fresh floors and an entirely new ground plan carried out—as far as we were concerned, a most confusing one at the time of excavation.

At this stage we were able to return to the foyer, "Room 154"; as Jacques said, the number of rooms and courtyards cleared to date was becoming "formidable".

Under the staircase a long, narrow room about the size of a small walk-in larder was now appearing. From it we took, one after the other, a series of perfect, buff-ware drinking vessels and goblets, as good as the day they left the potter's wheel, and I tried to imagine that housewife of long ago, storing her precious drinking vessels so carefully that four or five thousand years later I could find them just as she had left them.

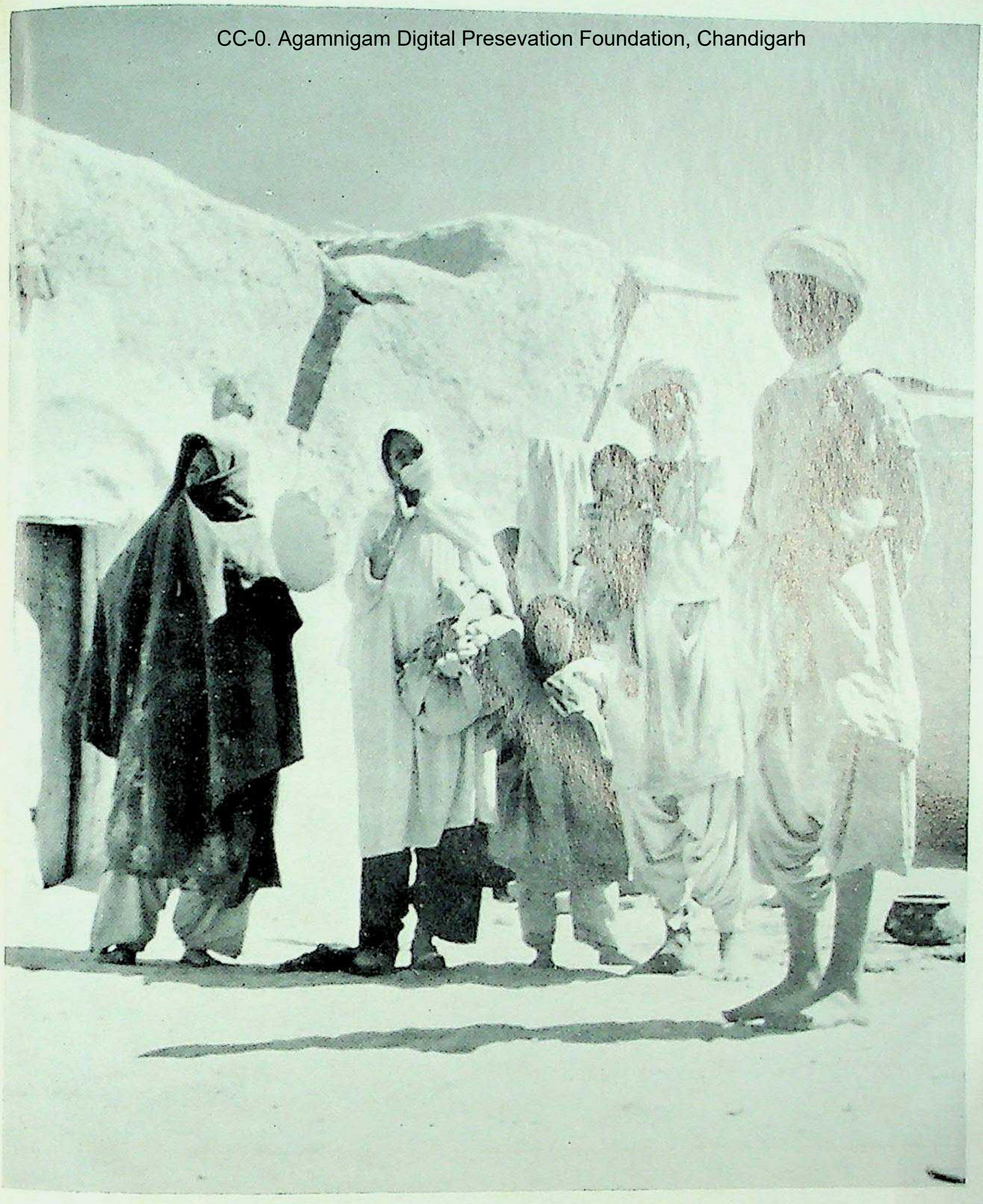
At last it was time to pack up for the day. A pair of black and white wagtails bobbed in and out of the doors and windows of Mound B. Sirdar's heavy-chested, crop-eared hound waited impatiently to escort his master home while L'Idiot the Afghan hound sat watching from a respectful distance—the Tsarist aristocrat beside a peasant. How philosophical L'Idiot was these days, walking to the edge of the dig and sitting bolt upright to stare into the darkening landscape unmoving for half an hour at a time, obviously deep in thought. Was he dreaming of events in the Mundigak of long ago, smelling old doggy trails left by his ancestors?

* * * *

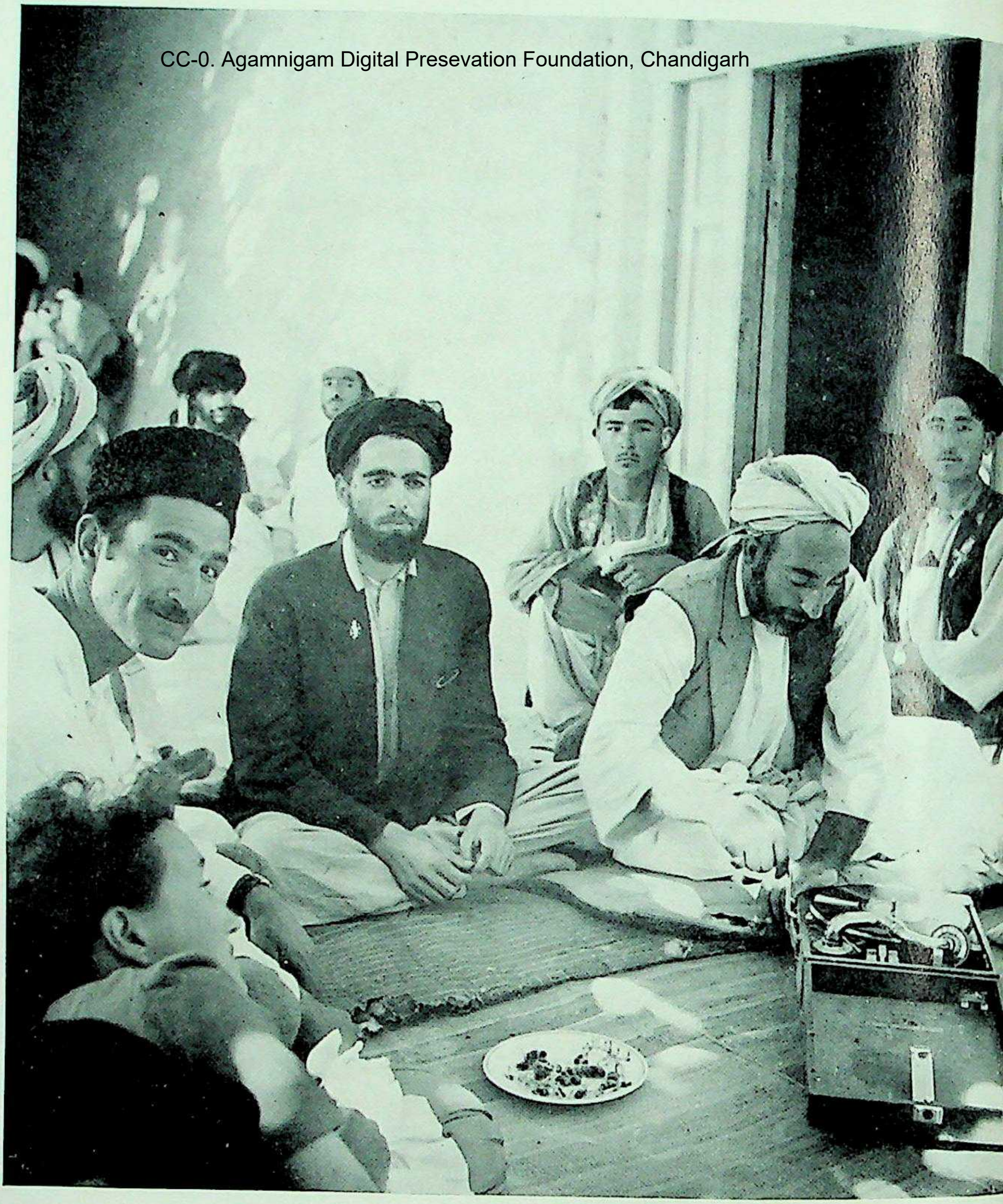
That night the moon was full and yellow and shone with an intense brilliance over the sleepy camp. Jacques and Achour took advantage of the light to go hunting for hares. The others went to bed, but I was restless. Putting on my striped quilted overcoat (for the nights were growing cold), I walked slowly up the side of Mound A to wander among the silent colonnades, the terraces, passageways, tiny rooms and spacious halls. What could this building have been? Who could have occupied it? What kind of people had they been and where had they come from? Where had they gone to, for that matter?

I settled myself on a wall behind the columns and pictured the scene as it must have been so many thousands of years ago. Jean-Marie, like all good archaeologists, was too prudent to speak of his own theories at this stage, and unless something was found to pin-point the site, some form of datable writing for instance, it would probably be years before he could analyse all the finds, the plans, the photographs and notes, and say with any assurance who had built this great structure, what had been its purpose and who had caused its destruction. But I was no professional and nobody could stop me dreaming.

What in fact did we actually know about Mundigak? First there



Traditionally Afghan women keep strict *purdah*: this picture, taken in the courtyard of Khuda-i-dad's home, shows one of the rare occasions when the author was allowed to photograph an entire family. Elderly parents, dissatisfied with only one son but many daughters, asked for charms to ensure more male offspring.



In Sheerga village we are royally entertained by the Governor of the district, Haji Hashim Khan, who is winding up the record player. In the foreground Ginette reclines on cushions and behind her Ebrahim watches the camera. (See page 116.)

had been the untouched mound as Jean-Marie had found it, rising like an upturned pudding basin some sixty feet from the soil and surrounded by its scattering of lower satellite mounds sprawling over twenty-five acres between it and the dried-up river. The river itself had probably disappeared even before the site had been abandoned three thousand years ago.

As we could see for ourselves, the mound was on the traditional caravan route from Herat and Girishk and the still fanatical Zamindawar country to the north-west, southwards to Kandahar, Quetta and the Indus Valley, north to Ghazni and Kabul. Jean-Marie and Ginette had begun their work in 1951 by cutting a trial trench right down the side of the main mound, but with the work of the intervening years this trench had been filled until today it was only a flattened track. It had shown them that there were at least thirteen construction levels roughly ranging from the end of the fourth millennium to the beginning of the first and it was more than likely that the actual occupation of these levels would have been by more than one set of people for each building. As we had been finding, the construction levels had in fact been altered and rebuilt several times by successive occupants over a long period.

The Casals had begun then to concentrate on the excavation of Mound A. On the top level, just below the surface, the last occupants of Mundigak had built granaries and silos of mud pisé—earth mixed with water and chopped straw. Jean-Marie had concluded that these were granaries because, though much smaller, they were very similar in design to the great granary of Harappa in the Indus Valley, consisting of parallel rows of bench-high walls for ventilation.

Near by had been the remains of coffer-like structures that might well have been grain silos and troughs for the feeding of the animals that brought the grain for storage. Three times these granaries and silos had been rebuilt, one on top of the other with very little alteration of design, and that pointed to a fairly long and peaceful occupation, perhaps by generations of the same peoples. In the last occupation the silos had been replaced by half-buried jars. A large pillar made of debris and covered with a plaster of pisé appeared to form a centre-piece from which branched tree trunks supporting a roof. The type of structure and of pottery found here seemed to point to a fairly primitive people whose quiet life came to an abrupt end about a thousand years before the birth of Christ. That they had some inkling of impending doom was obvious from the fact that the inhabitants built a small "guard-room" complete with a sentry-walk round the inside of the walls. Remnants of fire were found in the middle of the room, a large quantity of bullets of hard clay, used for slings, and of flint arrowheads. At the same time, the number of intact bowls and jars in the room indicated that the little defensive post had been taken without much resistance. The victors, whoever they were, did not stay, and from that day to this Mundigak had been abandoned to the wind and the sand.

Why?

Perhaps it was because by this time the river had already dried up and the once-fertile surrounding country become incapable of supporting life. Added to this, the insecurity of the period, invading armies or even small bands of marauders, may have discouraged further settlement.

Reckoning from those found in the trial trench the granaries were the thirteenth and last construction level, and of course when you are digging, you view the site piecemeal, like a film being run backwards in slow motion. True, at this stage we had only reached the tenth level—counting, as one should, from the earliest upwards; but the trial trench, six feet wide, some 135 feet long and sixty feet deep, had warned the Casals what to expect and now one could picture the broad outlines—the details would be filled in by careful excavation.

From the evidence of the trial trench it seemed that at first Mundigak consisted of semi-nomadic settlements followed by huts of mud pisé. Next came buildings of mud-brick and from now until the last period of the granaries, all buildings were of mud-brick. The first examples of pottery in these early levels was coarse and plain, developing into finer pottery decorated occasionally with painted designs. The first figurine was found in the fourth occupation level—this was a humped bull. The first seal was found in this level too; it was made of green steatite with a crude geometrical design of straight lines, was pierced by two holes and obviously was intended to hang from the neck on a cord. The same kind of seal was found in succeeding levels but the design grew more elaborate and more finely executed. This form of geometrical seal, probably used as a personal mark to seal the clay stoppers of bottles and jars, remained unchanged until the last occupation of Mundigak when a few new types were introduced, probably by outsiders.

In the next level, the fifth, little vases of alabaster appeared for the first time and here was the first possibility of dating. A quantity of wood ash was found and submitted to the Carbon 14 test. This corroborated the opinion already formed by the Casals that the oldest occupations of Mundigak went back to about the end of the fourth millennium.

Someone once said to me rather plaintively that archaeology used to be a quiet, inoffensive kind of science centred round a lot of holes dug in the ground in out-of-the-way corners of the world. But not these days. Today, any archaeologist worth his salt has to cope with things like Geiger counters and cosmic rays. The Carbon 14 test is a by-product of atomic research; it is still in the experimental stage, but it allows the dating of specimens up to 20,000 years old and can be applied to all organic matter, wood and charcoal being among the easiest to date. Briefly this is how it works. Radioactive carbon atoms of atomic weight 14 are produced in the atmosphere by cosmic rays from outer space. Carbon 14 is an isotope of ordinary carbon of atomic weight 12 and both are contained in the carbon dioxide of our atmosphere in a stable proportion corresponding with the rates of production and disintegration of C.14. In other words, a small proportion of carbon in atmospheric carbon dioxide is always radioactive as a result of bombardment by cosmic rays.

All plants take in carbon dioxide and all animals ultimately derive their body material from plant life. So all living organic matter contains the same proportion of C. 14 and C. 12 as exists in the atmosphere. As soon as an organism, whether it is a tree or an animal, is dead, it ceases to take in more carbon; instead it begins to lose it at a known fixed rate which can be determined in the laboratory to within about three hundred years, plus or minus. Chicago University had analysed our wood ash and given a date of 2,625 B.C., plus or minus three hundred years—with other evidence obtained in stratigraphy, Jean-Marie inclined to the earlier date.

Copper and bronze did not appear at Mundigak before the sixth level, in the form of a long pin with a flattened head pierced by a hole. The layers that followed—still all dwelling houses—showed the continuation of a well-established way of life with the same type of buildings and very little modification. The painted pottery improved considerably at this level and became abundant from the eighth level upwards. From the very beginning the pottery had been buff, and in the seventh level, side by side with naturalistic designs of leaves and so on, appeared pottery with a stepped motif, distinctive of the Quetta-ware. In the eighth level came the first signs of a "brandy balloon"—buff or rose-tan goblets exactly the same shape as present-day brandy glasses, a type of pottery that developed in the next two layers till the goblets were found in all sizes, some painted with ibexes and some with the leaves of the wild fig tree.

In the ninth level, the Quetta-ware type of designs became very abundant. With these nine levels the mound had risen to some thirty feet above the plain. It was now that Mundigak began to assume a real importance. The people who had been living on Mound A until this time, moved their houses to the slightly lower mound about 600 feet to the west, which we were calling Mound B. The debris that had accumulated on Mound A was now levelled and used as a huge pedestal on which was built the colonnaded monument where I was now sitting. This great temple palace seemed to have existed with some alterations and additions for many years, until eventually it was attacked and destroyed by a people who had built their own massive monument on top of it.

In this, the eleventh level, came a complete break with all that had gone before; these were newcomers with a less highly developed artistic sense than that possessed by the people they had conquered. For the first time the pottery became red and the purely geometrical patterns were painted deep purple on the red slip. Now followed what seemed to have been a very long intermediate period when the last great building slowly deteriorated and finally, possibly after a series of severe earthquakes during which the eastern end of it was badly damaged, it was given over to shepherds and nomads who used it as an occasional camping ground, building their hearths into the ruined floors and setting up their temporary homes for a few months at a time, before moving on. The already degenerated pottery became even more primitive and coarse until at last it was dark grey in colour, mostly plain although some was decorated with lines of violet or black. Occasionally there would be a piece of red or white pottery.

After perhaps several centuries of semi-abandonment, Mound A was once more occupied by settled people who levelled the top of the mound and built their huts and granaries of mud pisé and slipped back to the primitive state of the first occupants of the mound, some two thousand years earlier. And, one might add, looking down at the camp, almost to present-day standards!

It was, rather naturally, the tenth and eleventh layers that interested me most. The *monument massif* was well named. The rooms and terraces of the colonnaded monument had been filled in with mud-brick debris to take the weight of the new building, a structure that appeared to Jean-Marie and Jacques like some huge truncated half pyramid of masonry cubes piled on top of each other. There was no masonry here, however, but only huge blocks of sun-dried bricks with extensive terraces that had been repaired several times while in use. The northern side of the main bulk of the structure was overshadowed by an even higher massive structure of brickwork that adjoined it and appeared to have been used finally as the pedestal for several rectangular cells. All this part of the mound was badly damaged by earthquakes. So little of significance had been found in this building that it was mainly the *absence* of finds of a domestic nature that indicated its function as a public building of some kind. There were a bronze knife with a bone handle, a few shreds of red pottery with deep purple designs, and one small terracotta figurine possibly of a mother-goddess, with crudely-formed features and two spots of black paint for the eyes. By contrast the breasts were delicately moulded with a necklace and pendant falling between them. It was more like the figurines found in the Indus Valley than those of the much nearer Zhob Valley in Baluchistan.

As for dwelling houses, those were built on the ruins of the earlier houses belonging to the people of the colonnaded monument.

What a thrill it must have been for the Casals when, after weeks of back-breaking work clearing the debris that formed the foundations of the *monument massif*, they had first uncovered the merlons decorating the top of the colonnade! As I sat leaning against the columns now, with the moonlight gleaming gently on the ruins, I thought of the moonlight almost exactly ten years previously when I had wandered among the temples of the Appian Way just outside Rome and into a dark, inner chamber of the temple of the Vestal Virgins, to be frightened as never before by an overwhelming sense of evil.

Mundigak was already ancient and abandoned when the Romans began to build the Temple of the Vestal Virgins, but here, in spite of the moonlight and the occasional howl of a hyena and the grunt of a restless camel, I had no fear, not even of the very real danger of snakes and tarantulas that were undoubtedly lurking among the ancient pillars.

Here was a structure built by a people of strong artistic sense, a "classic" building compared with the heavy, coarse architecture of their conquerors. Anyone approaching the settlement in its prime would have seen its dazzling white colonnades from far off. The one against which I was leaning faced north, running from east to west with a wide space in the middle which formed the entrance to a series of courtyards and rooms. The eastern portion of the colonnade was badly damaged but the western section, with its decorative brick merlons and its whitewashed half-columns backed by a wall and fronted by a narrow bench, was strikingly Mesopotamian in style.

The red-ochred doorway through this section had given on to a short passage from which a staircase led up to the next floor or terrace which had most probably been backed by another whitewashed colonnade. The staircase had now been removed by the workmen and revealed rooms with hearths and a massive wall on the top of which had been found the bases of yet another colonnade; judging from the diameter of these stumps, the columns had been much taller than those I was leaning against now.

Almost the whole of the eastern portion of this monument had been destroyed by earthquakes which are quite common in Afghanistan. We know that there were widely disastrous earthquakes in the Middle East in 1,365 B.C., in 1,730 B.C. and others between 2,100 B.C. and 2,000 B.C. and again between 2,400 B.C. and 2,300 B.C. It could be that the buildings on Mound A had suffered from one of these cataclysms.

The facts that in the narrow passage across the terrace in front of the main colonnade—where it seemed natural there should be an entrance to the building—arrowheads and clay sling bullets had been found in abundance, together with traces of fire, and that the walls of the suites of rooms and courtyards attached to the main building were also blackened with fire, made it appear that after many years of peaceful, untroubled existence, invaders had attacked our cultured, civilized Mundigakis. The inhabitants received just sufficient warning to build a hastily-contrived defensive wall across the northern face of the columned structure, and as we had seen, this had fallen to the enemy after a short, sharp struggle.

Round three sides of the main building ran a system of perpendicular walls that climbed the slopes of the mound and formed a network of small cells. None of these appeared to have a doorway or a window or even an opening either to the outside or communicating with each other, and at first their purpose puzzled everyone. Then some of the cells were found to contain stores of various kinds—a hoard of bone needles and pins in one; two more contained shelf after shelf of the delightful "brandy balloons". Made of terracotta, a buff ground with elongated purple ibexes stalking round the sides, or birds and peepul leaves, the goblets were arranged in series according to size and to the form of pattern. There was no doubt that the people who made and used them were of a completely different type from their conquerors who used coarse red pots and constructed heavy, clumsy buildings. It became obvious that these storage chambers had been the cellars beneath the floors and terraces of the building and had been entered through holes in the cellar roofs. I recalled similar storage chambers below the courtyard of the Church of Saint Publius in a suburb of Valletta, Malta, where the Romans had stored grain. The only access to these chambers had been through circular holes covered with heavy stone lids situated in the courtyard.

Behind the whitewashed colonnade was a maze of rooms and courtyards where the excavations were concentrated this season. Blackened hearths, neatly rimmed with mud-brick edges, marble pestles and mortars, cups and bowls of translucent alabaster, hollowed doorstones, terracotta humped-backed bulls, female figurines, beads, spindle whorls. . . . In this part of the building at all events there had been plenty of residents. On the other hand, there was no doubt that most of the inhabitants of Mundigak at this period had lived on the nearby Mound B. In houses built on exactly the same orientation as the rooms on Mound A (very noticeable when you looked across from Mound B in the slanting rays of the evening sun), we had found the distinctive "brandy balloons", waisted "water tumblers" decorated in the stepped battlement design of the merlons over the colonnade, and green steatite seals repeating the stepped motif.

*Who were these people and where had they come from?*

Was there any clue in the fact that the stepped pattern, related to Quetta-ware, was also closely associated with Persian pottery, particularly that from the region of Persepolis?

For the next half hour, with the uninhibited release of imagination that only an amateur dare indulge in, I dreamt of the past, recalling the details of Sir Leonard Woolley's book on his findings at Ur of the Chaldees, that great citadel in what was Mesopotamia.

The early settlements round Ur were of mud huts with floors of beaten mud, fireplaces of dried mud and doors consisting of a wooden leaf attached to a pole higher than the door. The top of the pole was held by a metal ring projecting from the corner of the door lintel and revolving in it, while the lower end, also shod with metal, went through a hole in the paving, to rest and turn in the hinge-stone, a boulder of imported hard stone in which a cup-shaped hollow had been carved to take the pole. There could be no clearer description of the doors on "our" site.

We had been finding any number of spindle-whorls, the stone weights that were used on looms—and there were plenty of these at Ur. Stores of grain and heaps of animal bones were discovered at Ur, showing that harvests were reaped and domesticated animals kept—and the same thing applied to the people of Mundigak.

At Ur itself in the earliest levels below the thick clay deposits left by the Flood, Woolley had found lumps of hard clay that had once formed stoppers to bottles or jars, all stamped with the impressions of their owners' seals; where there were seals it was not unreasonable to suppose that the art of writing was already known, although Sir Leonard did not find any written records on this site. In Mundigak we too had been finding seals of a geometrical character, so far without any signs of writing.

Woolley had found many figurines of bulls made in copper; we had dozens made of terracotta. It seemed highly likely that Mundigak was contemporaneous with, or perhaps somewhat earlier than, the rule of King Sargon of Sumer and Akkad (Lower Mesopotamia) probably the Nimrod of the Old Testament, who ruled Ur from 2,630 B.C. to 2,575 B.C. Ur had been built by a people who outshone all their contemporaries in creative genius and energy. The first rulers often performed the duties of High Priest, Grand Master of the Clergy, Prime Minister and Minister of War, and lived among their people as their guardian and patron, in a palace that exactly reproduced the temple of the gods. Nobody knows for certain where these people originated.

Was it stretching imagination too far to link the people who had built our columned monument with Sir Leonard Woolley's Chaldeans who were traditionally supposed to have come from the East and who were of Indo-European stock, resembling Caucasian man?

According to Woolley they had certain elements common with the Indus Valley civilizations and he puts forward the possibility that they actually developed the first real civilization of which we have any knowledge at some as yet unknown site between the Indus and the Euphrates. Their original home was probably in hilly country and their temple architecture was a translation into brick of an original timber structure. People like these, coming from wooded, hilly country, nearly always associated their gods with the outstanding natural features of that country, worshipping them on "high places".

Woolley's description of the ziggurat at Ur particularly fascinated me, especially when I looked at our Mound A. The ziggurat had been a great stepped monument standing behind Nanar, the temple to the Moon-god, and there was an outer court to this temple, with a terrace. Behind this loomed a second and higher terrace on which stood the sanctuary and the tower. The approach to the shrine was on the north-west face, fronting the Nanar temple; here were three brick stairways, two against the main walls and one in the middle, at right angles to the wall, all three converging on to a great gateway. The building itself was divided by zones of colour, the lower stages black, the uppermost red and the shrine itself covered in blue glazed tiles with probably a golden dome, mystic colours that symbolized the divisions of the universe, the dark underworld, the earth, the heavens and the sun.

Surrounding the whole was a series of terraces filled with soil and planted with trees. Later on, when restoring the temple of Nanar someone had built a new feature, an outer façade and a wall dividing the courtyard from the sanctuary and decorated with mud-brick half-columns, a striking contrast to the normal tradition of rectangles and heavy masses.

The king, being the vice-regent of the gods upon earth, modelled his palace exactly on that of the temple, as we have seen. At one end of the building would be the entrance leading into a wide but shallow courtyard from which a double gateway flanked by what seemed to be purification chambers, led to the main or inner court. On the far side of this, two doors led through small antechambers to a long room corresponding exactly with the sanctuary in the temple. A heavy wall ran right through the building separating the temple from the complex of domestic chambers and forming two separate residential units each consisting of rooms grouped about an open central court; one group was reached directly by a doorway from the inner court, the other only by a winding passage and double doors from the sanctuary. Most temples contained residential quarters for the priest. In the palace too, the courtyards and temple-like rooms would be used for public reception and the sanctuary for the king's private court, but the domestic rooms behind these would be for the use of the king and his concubines, the king having his own direct entrance to his private suite, the more tortuous corridors to the matching domestic quarters being used by his womenfolk.

At Ur the rooms were found to be filled with ashes from the burnt wood panelling of the walls and ceilings. At Mundigak many of the chambers had also been filled with far more ashes than could be accounted for by mere window and door frames. Attached to the principal temple had been the Ministries of War, Justice, Agriculture and Finance, all of which used the large courts and public rooms for their administration. The rent, tithes and offerings to the gods, were paid in kind so that the temples had to have many storage rooms which generally were built around the sanctuary.

I looked once more at the wide courtyards, the colonnades, the thick dividing wall, the storage cells, the suites of rooms with their hearths. Could there not be a link of some kind? Could Mundigak have been a half-way stage to the more highly-developed civilization of the Sumerians?

I got up and stretched myself. In the direction of Sheerga a large fire was blazing. Every now and then the flames leapt into the air giving an uncanny reflection of what might have been a distant view of Mundigak itself four thousand years ago when its inhabitants must have stood on the wide walls and watched the advance of an approaching enemy. Perhaps they had heard tales of the invaders as they plundered and burnt their way through the country coming from—where? From the inhospitable north, making for the fertile, gentler lands in the south? Aryans from Central Asia? The peaceful community at Mundigak must have hoped almost to the last that their valley would be by-passed and then, when it was obvious the Barbarians were making for them, the young men had gathered their hunting weapons, and the older men had hastily built a wall in front of the wide courtyard of the temple-palace, with a narrow passage behind it, and an even narrower entrance that could be held by one man.

It had all been in vain. The enemy was tougher, stronger, more numerous and the men were in all probability professional warriors too. Fiercely the people of Mundigak had struggled to beat off the attackers. Sling bullets of hard, burnt clay, capable of inflicting considerable damage, whizzed through the air to bury themselves viciously in the sunbaked mud walls or in soft flesh; the sharp flint arrows and the bronze spearheads flashed through the air. Then came the firebrands soon catching the woodwork, with yellow flames greedily licking the carved panelling and wooden doorways of the palace until the great monument became a funeral pyre visible from every part of the valley, and the graceful white colonnades and scarlet doors were hidden in the clouds of swirling smoke and dust.

Had the conquerors set their surviving victims to work to level their own lovely buildings and raise up the coarse new ones, or perhaps the people of the Columns had been completely wiped out in the holocaust? Possibly the survivors had fled to the south or the west, escaping with their lives and their most precious belongings—perhaps the women and children fled before the enemy attacked, leaving only the menfolk to defend the settlement? Who could tell? For strangely enough, in spite of the slaughter that must have taken place, not a single human bone had been found among the ashes and the ruins of the houses and monument. The dead had all been removed perhaps to be given a mass burial. But if so, where? So far only one very shallow, communal grave had been found at the foot of Mound A, where seven bodies had been tumbled together as though in great haste and without ceremony. Could it possibly be that a mere handful of men was left to defend the temple palace in the narrow passageway, and that perhaps as a last gesture, they had made a concerted rush on the enemy at the foot of the slope, and seven of the handful had died, maybe one or two only managed to escape?

Perhaps when the skulls of the seven corpses were examined (they were still in Kabul in their protective plaster), we would discover if they were indeed long-headed Caucasians.

Perhaps, when the surrounding mounds have been excavated, some of the mystery surrounding Mundigak will be cleared up. I make no apology for letting my imagination run away with me in the meantime, for in *Archaeology from the Earth* Sir Mortimer Wheeler himself said, "we cannot properly understand the past unless we have a living sympathy with the human stuff which its relics represent. . . . We cannot understand for example, the structural mechanism of an ancient burial mound unless we can bring to bear upon its details a rational imagination capable of comprehending and vitalizing them . . . too often we dig up things, unrepentantly forgetful that our proper aim is to dig up people."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# *The Shrine of Shah Maqsud*

"TOMORROW," SAID EBRAHIM rubbing his ear nervously, "is the birthday of the Prophet, on Whom be peace. Perhaps we would go to Shah Maqsud then? It is a very holy place."

Because tomorrow was a Friday we all agreed this would be a splendid idea, all save Jean-Marie who had to catch up with his photography, and Jacques, who, with shirt-tail protruding through a hole in the seat of his trousers and his tattered, yellowed straw hat on the back of his head, strode off towards the hills where jungle cats, leopards, ibexes, wolves, foxes and hyenas were supposed to roam.

The rest of us jammed ourselves into the truck and bounced away, turning north at the mutilated camp signpost of which the legend was scratched away by passers-by as regularly as Mad Amin replaced it. To our right a smudge of green resolved into the village of Sheerga where Haji Hashim Khan, the Governor, lived—so did half of our workmen.

A little farther on we drove through the dried-up, almost treeless hamlet of Chenar and in between was nothing but undulating, arid desert. The news of our coming had already reached the lookouts at Chenar, and half a dozen men and boys raced to meet us. These were workers on the dig, and amid excited salaams they clamoured for a lift to Shah Maqsud. A group of enchanting little girls in spotted red ankle-length dresses and scarlet shawls over their heads, stared at us with great solemn brown eyes, clutching smaller brothers and sisters protectively, while in the background I could just glimpse the bobbing heads of one or two more daring village women, shrouded in black and peering round corners and over walls.

Not far now to Shah Maqsud but instead of the large village I had expected here was nothing but the shrine itself, a few private houses, one or two *chai-khanas*—tea-houses—and a small, leaf-covered bazaar. In the biggest graveyard I had yet seen there was an extraordinarily large population. It appeared that everyone wanted to be buried as close as possible to the holy shrine, maybe hoping for a good word at the Last Trump. The mass of graves was covered with heaps of white marble chips from the mountains, sparkling in the sun, while the more important graves had carved marble or stone slabs at head and foot and little white flags fluttering from slender poles jammed between the marble chips.

Outside a high mud-brick wall we parked the truck. Tall willowy poles on the other side of the wall stretched for the sky; dozens of small flags in vivid scarlet, green, yellow, blue, black and white, fluttered from them like ships' signals in the breeze. An old woman, so old that I supposed her lack of a veil no longer disturbed even the mullahs, met us at the gateway and led us through a large garden to a small whitewashed porch, the inner walls of which were decorated with patterns of green, pink and blue leaves painted on to the whitewash. We took off our shoes and left them among the slippers and *chaplies* of the worshippers on the stone paving, and then walked through the heavy wooden door covered with dull green metal beaten into intricate geometrical patterns.

"Look!" I caught Ginette's arm, but she too had noticed. The doorway, attached to its wooden posts, revolved in a hollowed-out stone at the top and bottom of the door, exactly like those in the houses built five thousand years before at Mundigak. The shudder of delight that swept us as we recognized this was another reminder that we were lucky enough to be excavating in a country whose present-day inhabitants could themselves demonstrate how their ancestors had lived.

In the middle of the courtyard a huge marble sarcophagus, entirely hidden by a gorgeous array of riotous silk and velvet covers, amazed our gaze; black velvet fringed with gold, pillar-box red fringed with gold, Brighton-rock pink fringed with green jade, orange and purple with a strip of black velvet on which were embroidered extracts from the Holy Koran. The colours clashed, yet, together with the dozens of flags fluttering from the slender wands on the ancient tree that offered shade to the tomb, they formed a harmonious whole. In a corner was a smaller marble tomb covered with many-coloured cloths; these coverings, Ebrahim told us, were put out only on specially holy days. "This is like your Christmas," he explained—"for three days we celebrate our Prophet's birth."

Excusing himself, he stood before the tomb in prayer. Nobody made any objection to our presence although worshippers were coming in now from the outer courtyard, sparing hardly a glance for the Christian intruders as they filed into the small mosque attached to the shrine. At the Imam's invitation, we too walked into the cool, dim room with its several archways, its striped *Glams* rugs spread on the marble floor, brightly-coloured *Surahs* from the Koran on the walls, and the, to our eyes, out-of-place chandeliers of coloured glass adorned with faded pink paper flowers.

According to Ebrahim the Shah Maqsud buried here had been a famous Arab warrior who had accompanied the first of the Arab armies invading Afghanistan not many years after the death of Mahommed in the seventh century; this meant that the tomb must have been one of the earliest Muslim monuments in the country.

Like the little shrine of Ser Poyshah, closer to our camp, Shah Maqsud's grave had a number of clay niches set into the roots of the old tree at its foot. There were traces of red wax from the candles burnt there, splashes of colour down the trunk. By the side of the tree, raised from the ground, sheltered by a small roof and covered with a green cloth, rested the Holy Koran. Before it the Imam had stood to call the Faithful to prayer, since this shrine appeared to have no *minar*, or tower.

We reclaimed our shoes, distributed *baksheesh* to the porteress, who had been joined by two more ancient crones, and wandered round the outer courtyard. Under the shade of tall trees, an unusual sight in this country of desert and gnarled stumps, groups of men and children sat and rested peacefully, or nibbled at *nan* and grapes. At the far end a kind of cloister had been built from mud pisé, with a series of large clay ovens built into the wall. These were used to cook food for the crowds on feast days.

In front of this, intending worshippers were washing their faces, hands and feet in the prescribed fashion, in a large pool of water. Behind them, between the pool and the shrine, a raised mud platform surrounded the graves of lesser saints, each with a carved marble headstone. Another mud platform about three feet high supported two large *domana* drums, each shaped like half an orange, and flanked by a pole bearing the hand of Fatima and another with a sprinkling of small flags.

A gateway set into the wall by the side of the cloister led out into the bazaar and here the narrow lanes were roofed with branches and dried grasses spreading patches of dappled gold in the shade. According to our workmen, Shah Maqsud was a centre for local handicrafts but all I could find were the slender reed pipes known as "*nal*" or "*nar*" (the "l" and "r" are interchangeable), and some rosaries of pale yellow-green stones quarried in the mountains above us, cut and fashioned in Kandahar and brought back to Shah Maqsud for sale to pilgrims.

For the rest, the little shops, each raised two or three feet from the ground by mud-pisé platforms, sold the usual assortment of printed cloth from Russia, dried pulses, rosy pomegranates, raisins, grapes and violently-coloured boiled sweets. A man bent double shuffled past, a deep wicker basket filled with long white grapes strapped to his back. A cage with a fighting partridge, a donkey carrying panniers of fruit, pilgrims crowding to watch our reactions—this was the bazaar of Shah Maqsud.

Hassan, Hashim, Mad Amin and the cook had long since disappeared. Now the rest of us collected our belongings from the truck and set off for our picnic.

"You are carrying all that?" asked Ginette ominously at sight of my load.

With visions of a ten minute walk to the foothills, I assured her that my two cameras, ciné camera, sketch book, reading material, lunch packets and quilted overcoat were not at all heavy.

Forty-five minutes later we were still climbing up into the mountains, following a tiny streamlet rippling over rocks and stones. We passed an unromantic army-surplus tent and called our greetings to the Hindu merchants from Kandahar who were camping here for the holiday—Hindus and Christians, all were welcome at the Shrine of Shah Maqsud.

Here and there the gorge widened sufficiently for a gnarled fig tree bearing the smallest imaginable fruit to thrust its roots determinedly between the rocks, with an occasional narrow strip of grass to fling a bright patch of green into the grey-and-khaki landscape. When it seemed we must have climbed too high for anything more to grow, we found the last of the green patches with a minute waterfall under which we distributed our apples and grapes wrapped in polythene bags, and filled our plastic mugs from the clear, sweet water.

The air was still and peaceful. Only the bubbling of the stream and our chatter broke the silence. Behind and around us towered the loose granite rocks of the mountains, and below us, spread out like a relief map, the flat, dusty valley of the Kishk-i-Nakhod Rud fringed with grape-black mountains melted into the haze.

When we finished eating, Achour and Ebrahim set up a can for target practice. Ginette lay under the tree to doze. I collected my sketch book, a copy of *Foundations in the Dust*, and my *chupan*, and climbed up to a little flat-topped prominence on which the sun was still shining; already our deep gorge was cast into cold shade.

The way back was much longer and more tiring than our original path and entailed scrambling over a series of enormous boulders; but we got down to the plain at last. We had almost reached the truck when we passed three tall Afghans who paused and stared at our little party. Then they broke into indignant speech to which Ebrahim and Achour replied light-heartedly.

"They tell us it is wrong to bring our wives out without *chadris*," Ebrahim explained, then added: "Please, may I have just five minutes for a prayer?"

He rushed into the whitewashed porch of the shrine and from the courtyard floated an urgent, imperative drumming, hypnotic in its appeal. We followed the sound to the raised mud dais in the corner where two bearded Afghans in white turbans sat cross legged, beating violent tattoos on the drums with long slender sticks. An old man, a youth with the slanting eyes and high-flat cheekbones of the

Hazaras, and a little boy wearing a striped shirt and curly-toed shoes, crouched at the foot of the dais, watching. In front of the drums, lost in a trance, a small Hazara lad danced barefoot to the rhythmic beat, a ceaseless turning and hopping. He was quite oblivious of his audience.

"On holy days they play the drums every sunrise and sunset," explained Mad Amin who had rejoined us as we watched.

It was time now to turn for home. Half-way down the bazaar we bumped into Amanullah, one of the "mouse" brothers. Earlier I had been making inquiries about *nal* flutes and Amanullah now offered to help me to choose one.

Two sturdy chestnut horses were tethered in the narrow lane. "They are the horses of Haji Khan," said Amanullah. A moment later we came face to face with Haji Khan himself, his high forehead crowned by a golden *rukchinr* cap and a grey and gold turban, his smooth expression reluctantly yielding to a slow, withdrawn smile.

Amanullah salaamed to the Governor and then took it upon himself to tell him that I had been learning Pushtu in the camp.

The "mouse" brother turned to me like a proud teacher with his star pupil before the school inspector.

"*Bogu,*" he urged, "*Pushtu bogu az Haji Sahib!*"

My efforts left Haji Khan more than ever convinced of the superiority of the male sex, but still gracious enough to invite us all to lunch with him the following Friday.

* * * *

A delegation awaited us outside the village of Sheerga and guided us down a narrow lane between high mud walls, through an archway and another doorway and so into a small garden filled with deliciously shady trees. We were all present this Friday, all but Maricq who had left us some time back to continue his studies in the north.

We were in the garden of Haji Hashim Khan's guest house; carpets, long velvet bolsters edged with lace, and soft rugs had been spread under the shade of an ancient mulberry tree. The saturnine Haji Khan, all smiles as he reclined with a turquoise hookah by his side, rose to greet us. Soon the gateway was jammed with the entire male population of Sheerga—most of them our workmen, who greeted us with such fervent enthusiasm, one would have thought it was at least a year since we had last met, instead of half a day! A small boy in a turban much too big for him had been staring at us unblinking from a perch on top of the wall; now he toppled over, fortunately landing in the lap of Nasruddin, our tall dandy from the dig. After this minor diversion, conversation flagged while processions of men filing from the house through the garden and into a small building behind us passed carrying enormous dishes of appetizing fragrancy. After an interval Nasruddin appeared at the doorway; he bore a clean towel over one arm and a long-spouted silver ewer of warm water in one hand and a silver basin to match in the other. We took off our shoes, washed our hands, then passed barefoot into the cool twilight of the inner room. It was a long, high-ceilinged chamber with but one small window high in the wall. When our eyes had accustomed themselves to the gloom we could see that the entire length of the whitewashed room was spread with a white sheet, bordered with cushions and rugs; the cloth itself was covered with an array of *pilaos*, chicken curries, bowls of *mast* (curds) and fruit.

Somehow we all crammed into the room, the servants with a collection of hangers-on down at one end of the cloth, and Ebrahim and the rest of us at the other, with Haji Hashim Khan in the middle next to me. Opposite was his brother and a grave-looking gentleman dressed in sombre black, who proved to be a Mufti, learned in Islamic law.

If the Afghan suffers from a national fault it is that of being over-generous and hospitable. This, as I was to find, applies not to the wealthy town-dweller only but also to the poorest peasant, who will kill his last chicken to feed an unexpected guest. It is usual to offer some gift in return when taking food with a poor household, but there were to be many occasions when my proud though impoverished hosts would, with the greatest dignity imaginable, refuse any recompense.

Not of course, that Haji Hashim Khan was impoverished. On the contrary he was the wealthiest man in the district and now, gravely complaining that I was not eating, he selected choice pieces of lamb and chicken to hand to me. Cutlery had been laid for us Europeans, but everyone else used fingers. Being accustomed to eating in this way in India and Pakistan, and preferring it for Indian-style meals, I disregarded my cutlery. A few days later, Sirdar, who was going over every detail of the meal and whom incidentally, I had not noticed at all at the party, said to me with an approving smile: "*Khanum Sahib* ate with fingers like us—that was good, that better is, that more clean is; fingers are clean, those things are not clean," and he mimicked the handling of knives and forks. As I was to learn before the end of our season, it made no difference where we went or what we did, within a few hours everyone in the valley knew all about it in greater detail than we did ourselves; how we had reacted, what we had said, how we had looked.

After lunch hands were washed again and then we resumed our places outside on the rugs under the trees. Bowls of delicious, small red and white grapes were passed around, together with the magnificent hookah which only Achour attempted to smoke. Achour had started to grow a beard, which gave him added importance; it was a neatly-trimmed fringe to his chin, very unlike Jacques' wild tangle. Although he was a Roman Catholic, his father had been a Muslim and Achour himself had been to Mecca. With such a background he was soon on close terms with the Mufti.

I brought out a small Pushtu vocabulary, determined to try some of it on our host.

Anxiously I looked for suitable phrases. Unfortunately it happened to be a handbook for soldiers, written, I believe, in Kipling's day. "*Da Khyber lar kumah dah?*"—"Which is the way to the Khyber?" No, I could see no reasonable opportunity for asking that, being five or six hundred miles from the Khyber! "*Pa de gado bande daru-golai bar-krah.*" Could I then ask for the ammunition to be loaded on to carts? Perhaps this request might be misunderstood.

What about "Your rifle is dirty. . . ."? The trouble with that was that no rifle was in sight. Ah, here was something. "*Amin la tasara*", "And the same to you!" I waited in vain for a suitable opportunity to insinuate this gem into the conversation. So I took a photograph while Haji Hashim Khan clapped his hands for someone to produce a gramophone. He played us a selection of Pakistani film music while willing hands poured green tea into minute cups. Sugar was put into the first cup only—it was meant to last through subsequent refillings until you turned your cup upside down to indicate that you'd had enough. It was considered bad manners to drink fewer than three cups of tea, but for me this was no hardship—I find the green tea, without milk and only very little sugar, fragrant and refreshing.

"Music! Let us have music and dancing!" The Governor lolled back on a purple velvet bolster, nibbling at a bunch of small green grapes, and demanded fresh entertainment.

A boy in a dull red turban produced a tin flute and Nasruddin, acknowledged expert in musical affairs, produced an enormous tambourine painted with orange flowers. In a moment a dozen men and boys had formed a circle on the dusty space beneath the trees, each dancer armed with a pair of short sticks.

The music began; the men started to move, slowly at first, beating each other's sticks, then gradually faster and faster, winding in and out of the circle, squatting, kneeling, even lying on their backs and wriggling around in this manner, but always moving and keeping the beat with their neighbour's sticks. This type of stick dance, a relic of sword-dancing days, is popular among the Baluch tribes, but this was the first time I had seen it in Afghanistan. The dust rose and eddied in a fine mist, lit by shafts of sunshine falling through the leafy branches, and the audience applauded with delight—"*Wah, wah, shahbash. . .!*"

At last the party was over and we were escorted by our hosts back to our truck.

The Governor rarely had to provide all the food for guests. The order went out for everyone in the village to contribute in kind, even though they weren't allowed to participate!

Following our entertainment by Haji Hashim Khan at his end of the valley, we were all invited to a meal with the most important mullah at the opposite end. It was impossible to refuse without creating a good deal of jealousy and bad feeling between the communities. The four mullahs of Aroorkh now came to remind us of the invitation for the following Friday, and when the day arrived our host, an elderly man called Haji, met us at the imposingly wide doorway of his home in the centre of the village and then led the way down a lane, through a farmyard to the back entrance, or rather, to the entrance to the guest house. However hospitable he may be, a man's private home with the women's quarters is not for entertaining strangers.

A guard armed with a stout stick sat at the entrance to the guest-house and, just inside the wide doorway, we stumbled over two or three men busily working on an immense pair of new wooden doors; they were carving simple but effective designs on the pale yellow wood. The courtyard was large, with two trees at the far end, a large blackboard—the mullahs held a school here—and the single-storied guest rooms all down one side.

We were ushered into a room carpeted with fine rugs and comfortable bolsters; small posies in cups were set in niches in the white-washed walls. So often at the dig I had found what had first seemed to be a window and then had failed to penetrate the full thickness of the wall—of course those apertures must have been niches like these. As at Mundigak, the rooms were lofty, with small doors and tiny windows set high in the walls, usually above the doors.

One by one, workmen from the dig, inhabitants of Aroorkh, came to greet us; Mir Mad Sehn, the pomegranate man, old Malang of the hoarse voice, and half a dozen others. Over in the corner by the blackboard, several men were supervising the cooking in large black cauldrons and on open spits. When all was ready and our appetites thoroughly whetted by the delicate aromas drifting across the yard, we were ushered into the adjoining room, down the centre of which a white cloth had been spread on the floor; the usual cushions and rugs surrounded it. What a feast was spread before us! Slices of red water-melon decorated with their black pips; pale-green melons sliced diagonally with great artistry; dishes heaped high with *pilaos*, white rice, yellow rice, boiled and fried rice, with raisins, with hard-boiled eggs, with chicken and lamb and blanched almonds; aubergines cooked in a thick sauce of *mast* (the local version of yoghourt); bowls of uncooked *mast*; plates of deep-red pomegranate seeds already removed from the fruit, more dishes with *shirini*, literally "sweet milk", a kind of milk pudding made with crushed almonds.

We stuffed ourselves until we could scarcely move, only to be accused by our host of having made no impression at all on the food, which indeed was true: the meal seemed almost untouched.

The unfinished dishes were passed down the cloth to the relays of workers and poor relations. One plateful of *shirini* was handed to two small girls dressed in bright red gowns. Whooping with delight they ran off to a corner to share this treat with their tiny brother, gorgeous in a sparkling gold cap adorned with mirrors and a star-pointed tinsel ornament, his great dark eyes outlined in *kohl*.

Haji Sahib looked about seventy years old, a venerable patriarch, surrounded by his nephews, four handsome young men. Ebrahim interpreted for us—Haji Sahib had had four wives it seemed, all trying hard to produce sons, but two giving him nothing but daughters, the third had produced one son only and the fourth—ah well, he had high hopes of her, for she was his newest, youngest bride. At his knees clung the tiny boy with a tinsel cap, Haji Sahib's only and most precious son.

"How many children have you altogether, Haji Sahib?" we asked, but Haji, like everyone else, never bothered to count daughters—he only knew he had one son.

Sitting opposite me was a bashful young nephew, a regular dandy with gazelle eyes, side-curls, and a downy beard. Haji Khan, looking slyly at the young man, poked him in the ribs. "Why don't you take him with you to work in your holes?" he asked Jean-Marie.

The youth twirled his curls with long slender fingers, unsullied by manual labour, and blushed as his more manly cousins laughed at his discomfort. He was much too beautiful to seem real.

Presently Haji Khan set down his son, gathered the folds of his white *purtak* trousers and rose to his full, impressive height. Would the *Khanum Sahibs* be pleased to meet his womenfolk? They would be very welcome—without cameras, of course!

Ginette and I laid our cameras ostentatiously on the cushions, then followed the old man across the courtyard, through the wide gateway and the farmyard and along the lane to the main gate. Here, like the fortifications of some medieval castle, the solid gateway led to a cool, lofty corridor and out into another courtyard.

Haji Sahib indicated a narrow, mud-brick staircase with perilously worn high treads and no guard rail, clinging shakily to the wall of the women's quarters. Leading the way, he climbed to the roof where a bevy of women and children crowded round us with twittering excitement.

One couldn't even begin to count them all as they merged and edged and jostled for the best positions. Fully half were ancient females in rusty, shapeless black garments, their wrinkled faces giving no clue to their real age—probably not more than fifty. But there were pretty, younger women too, half a dozen of them wearing Pakistani dress of baggy trousers narrow at the ankles, tunic shirts of flowered material and a gauzy veil over their heads. At least three of them were outstandingly attractive, made-up in Western style but with a Hindu *tikka* or caste mark on their foreheads. One sometimes sees fashion-conscious Muslim women wear this purely as decoration, but I never expected to find it in an Afghan village.

All were eager to show off knowledge of Western behaviour; the women rushed to shake hands and escort us into a small, clean room furnished with striped rugs, a *charpoy* covered with carpets, a heavy, carved wooden cradle covered with a woven cloth in one corner and a huge, orange-painted tambourine hanging on the wall. The window was a big one for an Afghan house, and printed curtains were looped up round it—again a surprise departure from the normal Afghan style.

Haji Khan arranged himself on the *charpoy* with his son in his lap, and Ginette and I sat on the floor. The rest of the harem gathered round intently, those in front sitting down, the others peeping over shoulders. Small girls with runny noses clutched at tiny babies whose eyes were heavily rimmed with black *kohl*, and more tea was produced for our refreshment.

One of the pretty girls was Haji Khan's newest wife, the other two were his daughters, and wives, daughters, mothers-in-law, all pressed closely to examine Ginette and me. I had brought a bag of bright green, pink and yellow sweets from Shah Maqsud, for just such an occasion, and I handed them to Haji Sahib to distribute to the children. There were boys among the crowd—more nephews I supposed, or maybe grandsons, and they were given the lion's share while the little girls, obviously not even expecting a favour, absorbed themselves in examining my ear-rings and showing me their own and their little diamond and ruby nose-rings.

Conversation lapsed after we had discussed our offspring, or lack of offspring, and soon we followed Haji Sahib back to the guest house. Outside on the flat roof, we discovered that the women could overlook the guest courtyard and had had a good view of our entertainment while sheltering themselves behind the low parapet.

We waved farewell and went back to join the men who were gossiping over bowls of warm milk into which a few drops of weak tea and whole basins of sugar had been poured—sugar is expensive and rationed and to display so much was a way of showing off one's wealth. We were all presented with posies of marigolds, the men included, and escorted by the four mullahs to the edge of the village and through a small graveyard filled with well-carved marble tombstones, and here we made our last farewells.

We walked slowly back towards the camp. Half a mile from home came a thudding of hooves on the hard soil and Achour cantered towards us on the Kuchhi Chieftain's chestnut horse. Achour had chosen to stay in camp this Friday and while he missed a good feast, he had the advantage of a ride. Not only had the Chieftain brought the horse, but a dark, snarling camel wearing a stout wooden saddle covered with a printed cloth edged with turquoise beads.

Splendid in claret-and-emerald velvet waistcoats and smocked and embroidered shirts, the Chieftain and his companions were waiting for us at camp. Already the sun was low, but while the Kuchhis sat and sipped tea outside the mess, the rest of us took turns riding the horse and the camel round the ancient mounds of Mundigak.

"I have three hundred tents, fifteen hundred camels and six thousand sheep," the Chieftain told us modestly, when we asked how big was his camp.

A bit different from the Kuchhi camp Achour and I had visited! "You must come, I will send horses and camels to fetch you on Juma," he promised, leaving us full of pleasant anticipation as he rode away.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# *Mood Indigo*

LIFE WAS NOT all holidays at Mundigak and, as the weeks went by, work grew harder. Mail was non-existent and at times the monotony of our daily tasks wrapped even the best of us in clouds of depression.

Ginette wandered across to watch us working on Mound B. For the first time I saw her looking bored.

"Eight days—but eight days on one terrace, and there is nothing to see!" she groaned. "And Jean-Marie say there is one more terrace to dig—and maybe underneath that, another one. . .!"

For days now the majority of the men on Mound A had been shovelling away tons of earth; whenever the wind was in the wrong direction, we on Mound B were enveloped in billows of blown sand.

Ginette looked enviously at the complex of rooms in the series of houses we had been excavating. The middle of Mound B seemed to be almost like a sizeable castle surrounded by a massive, mud-brick wall buttressed and built on foundations of huge stones packed with mud. The inner walls were of mud pisé or single brick thickness with good terracotta drains, but in the eastern corner, where we had been completing Achour's site, we seemed to be in a slum area, a kind of shanty-town of dilapidated, jerry-built huts with deep pits full of animal bones and, covering the huts, several feet of rubbish.

We still had our little gossips, the men and I, and our conversation ranged far and wide. Did we pray in England, were there mosques there? Did we have cows and what was their yield? I felt like a very uninformed quiz-kid at times. I taught Bismullah and Ali Gwul how to play noughts and crosses in the sand and they showed me their version of knucklebones. We often found whole collections of these bones in the dig and, since we needed only one or two for our records, there was always a scramble for the throw-outs—here it seemed, was another game that hadn't lost its popularity in thousands of years.

We still spoke a mixture of Persian and Pushtu, but Pushtu was more generally used and I began to pick up odd phrases. Instead of the Persian "*Ba mani Khuda*", ("God be with you") which we used in Kabul, I now learned to say "*Khuda' pa man*", to which one should reply "*Khu dat de malses*". In return I taught them phrases of English and now I would be greeted in the morning by a "Goodbye *Khanum Sahib*, goodbye", from Sirdar.

Ali Gwul's big brother Ramazan had learned a bit of French while working with Ginette. "*Oh, quelle horreur!*" and "*Oo, là là!*" sounded strange in a guttural Pushtu accent from this young Hazara with the high cheekbones. It was even stranger the day Ramazan used a new phrase he had heard Ginette employ when calling the Afghan hound L'Idiot to her side. Ramazan was scraping at the surface of a wall and a couple of chambers away, Ginette was busy on her own.

"*Khanum Sahib, viens ci, couche-toi!*" Ramazan called to her urgently, as he found some strange new feature in the wall.

Blushing rosily, Ginette joined him. She was much too wise to let him know his mistake or she would never have heard the last of that particular phrase.

These days there was an autumnal chill in the morning and evening air, although daytime was as hot as ever. This meant that I would start out in the mornings wearing my Ghazni posteen while Jean-Marie had a wonderful Pasha-like ankle-length coat of pastel-blue edged with black astrakhan and lined with sumptuous fox fur.

We were plodding along on Mound B, longing for something really spectacular like the splendid staircase Ginette had found on her site. Steadily I worked my way through layer after layer of buildings that had been altered, rebuilt, pulled down, destroyed, built on top of and generally messed about, but we hoped sometime to form a complete picture of the various occupational levels. Some of them had lasted for hundreds of years.

Ginette was now destroying her magnificent wide staircase to find what lay beneath—actually, to her dismay, it proved to be another terrace. As if in compensation, she discovered a strange little room behind the colonnade; it had paper-thin walls and an odd, irregular window like a hole in a Henry Moore statue, high up in the side of the wall. The room itself was the size of a telephone booth. What on earth could it have been used for, we wondered?

While we puzzled over the room, Achour made a discovery of his own. With his most disarming expression (that should have warned me, of course), he handed me his plastic cigarette case, the type made to take packs of American cigarettes.

"*Regardez!*" he urged me. "Look inside!" And he held the box up to the light.

Something monstrous whose body filled the entire case was struggling to move squashed legs.

With a laugh, Achour shook the box like a cocktail shaker, then opened it, spilling its contents on to the sand. A pale yellow-green spider tumbled dizzily on to the ground and staggered drunkenly towards me.

"Tarantula!" exclaimed Achour proudly.

In spite of my repulsion I was fascinated. I had always imagined that tarantulas were orange or black or brown. I had certainly never realized they could be such a delicate colour, the colour of the sun shining through spring leaves. Then the great fuzzy-hairy legs gathered strength and before the creature could run away, Achour prodded it back into the box.

Achour was also our snake collector, and several times a week there would be a cry from the men and wild gestures towards Mound A where Achour could be seen performing a victory dance, brandishing a stick and accompanied by encouraging shouts. This performance would be followed by the sight of Achour running full pelt down the side of the mound, holding a long, whippy krait by the tail, to manoeuvre it into the bottle of alcohol destined for the Pasteur Institute. Occasionally a snake was incautious enough to fall asleep on top of the cool, newly washed potsherds, making it easy game, and towards the end of the season, Achour uncovered a whole nest of kraits tucked into a five-thousand-year-old wall on Mound A.

With the days drawing in, we were starting work half an hour later, and making up for the time by cutting short the midday break, but we none of us seemed to be very fit. I had developed a heavy cold and had aches in my back and limbs. The cold grew worse and at last Ginette decided that I needed some of what Jean-Marie called "foot-mustard"—in other words, the English variety, fit only for foot-baths! So with a mustard plaster on my back and chest I retired to my string bed.

Next morning, long after everyone else had started work, I dragged off to my site. Jean-Marie had taken over and discovered a third wall running beneath the two I had already excavated; each one used the earlier as a foundation, but deviated slightly from the line of the original. The process of finding the actual face of the wall is an intriguing one—you tap it sharply, but not too hard, with the blunt end of the hand-pick, and then watch the soil that has remained close-packed for thousands of years fall clean away as though it has been sliced off, leaving a whitewashed surface to enchant your admiring gaze.

This morning the mere act of climbing in and out of the hole assumed for me the proportions of an Everest climb so I was bundled back to my bed with a thermometer that registered forty degrees Centigrade—these Continental gadgets are so confusing. I had no idea how one converted Centigrade to Fahrenheit and it was only next day, using my own thermometer, that I disbelievingly read nearly 105° Fahrenheit. Death, I felt, with my face swollen by ear- and tooth-ache, was very close.

My mood was not improved by the sulphathiazole that Ginette poured frantically into me. Since Jean-Marie too, was now ill work on my site had to be abandoned.

During this period, Ginette noticed traces of yet another colonnade on Mound A, with columns that were thicker at the base than those we had already excavated, and that therefore presumably had been taller. This colonnade was standing parallel to, but behind and above, the first colonnade and there was little left of this latest find, so little that only someone of Ginette's experience could have spotted the battered stumps. But these too had to be destroyed so as to trace the enormously thick wall that had supported them. As if this discovery was not enough for one week, Ginette found an intriguing small chamber immediately behind the original colonnade, now half-full of cinders. Under these lay a hearth quite unlike the normal round domestic hearths with their mud-brick rectangular sills. This was no more than a shallow spoon, reddened at one end and with a blackened channel forming the "handle". Did it hold some religious significance?

"It may be the key to the whole building," said Ginette excitedly, for we still did not know what the colonnaded monument really was.

Meanwhile I tossed on my string bed and tried to summon a smile for my evening visitors. Ebrahim would look in with the latest news from Mound B, Nasruddin would bring a pailful of flowers from his garden at Sheerga, red and purple dahlias, yellow snapdragons, double pink peonies, tiny pinks and large michaelmas daisies.

Jacques appeared, quietly triumphant as he held up a bunch of pigeons.

"Six with six cartridges!"

It was eight or nine days before I was allowed to get up, only to sit in state in a camp chair under an awning outside the mess. From this vantage point I could observe the secret workings of the camp while the rest of the team were away on the dig. All day long Cook and Hassan entertained their special friends to cups of tea and press-ganged Nasruddin and old Sultan into plucking pigeons. The sound of Nasruddin and his father conversing endlessly together was like a high-pitched gramophone record played backwards, a Donald Duck gabble.

As the workmen passed my chair on their way to and fro they would approach with a smile and lift a corner of the reed awning.

"Are you well, *Khanum Sahib*, are you better?"

I was getting better daily, though still incredibly weak and I never did discover what had hit me. While I had to rest I had leisure to watch the whole process of building a house from mud. Old rheumy-eyed Shireen, the master-builder from Sheerga, and his assistant, a bearded villager of fierce aspect, had finished the new toilet weeks ago and had now switched to building a new cabin for Jacques in the gap between mine and Achour's. Shireen was so old, he looked as though he must have been dug up from one of our prehistoric houses. His face and hands were weather-beaten to the consistency of well-tanned leather; the sand blew into the crevices of his face until it was a grey mask and he wore the most ragged collection of patched garments I ever set eyes on; even his thin, small turban was patched and tied like an inadequate bandage round his scanty grey locks. He had always in his watery, blue eyes a mild, kindly glint that gave just the hint of the chubby-faced boy he must once have been to inspire his name of "the Sweet".

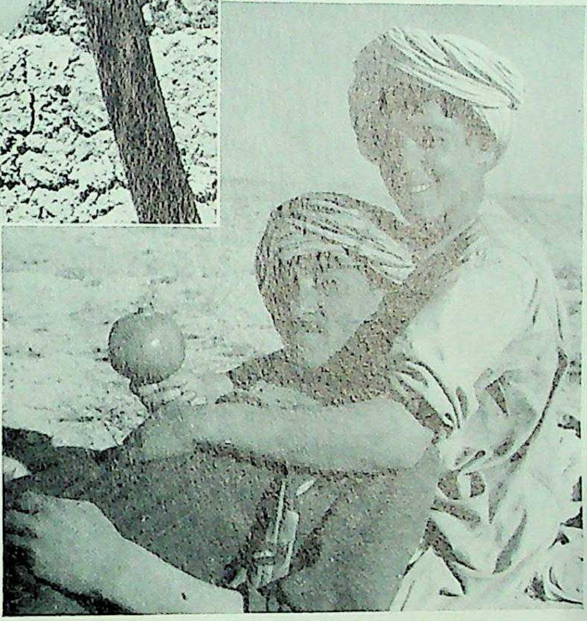
Sultan Mahommed made extra trips every day to bring water—about ten trips daily to give us twenty gallons and since he was paid two Afghanis, forty phuls for each trip (about 1*s*. 3*d*.), water turned out to be the most expensive single item in building the new house.

The water was poured on to the flat dusty ground and stirred into a gooey mud pie. Then the bearded villager tucked up his baggy trousers and with bare feet trampled the mixture as though he was treading grapes. Meanwhile Jacques had marked out the foundations of his cabin with string and the floor had been dug down six or seven inches. Now Shireen the Sweet started his job. He took lumps of the mud, patting them into oblong blocks, and laid them in a row, outlining the cabin. They were left to dry in the sun for a day, then the next row was laid on top. As the walls grew, his assistant shovelled mud up to Shireen where he squatted on top of the building. After the walls were finished, and had been left to dry for another day, the beams, six of them, were laid about twelve inches apart across the top of the walls and their ends packed with mud plaster. Next old Shireen clambered up the rickety ladder armed with reed mats which he laid on top of the beams, covering these with a layer of camel-thorn brush and small bushes which had been gathered from the surrounding gullies.

The master builder finished off the walls, outside and in, with a thin mixture of mud and chopped straw, smoothing this with his horny palms. More plaster was spread over the flat roof, the ends of the beams were sawn off level, and with the help of Mad Amin, the wooden door and window frames were fitted.

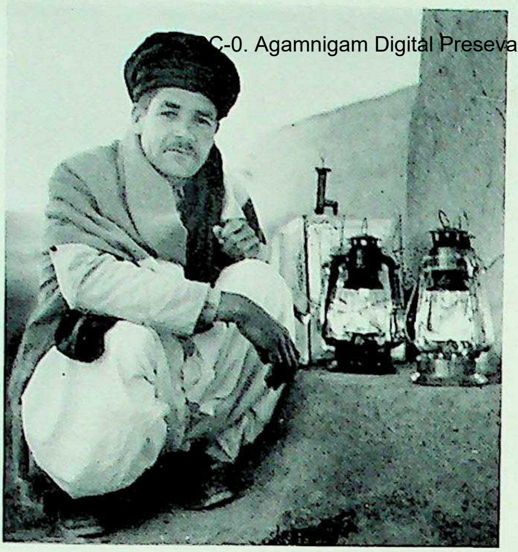
The whole hut had taken a fortnight to complete and cost just over £6 for labour, plus about the same for the wooden door and window frames and the roof beams, all bought in Kandahar bazaar,

*Left:* Master-builder Shireen "the Sweet" placing beams for the roof of Jacques' new house. (See page 128.)

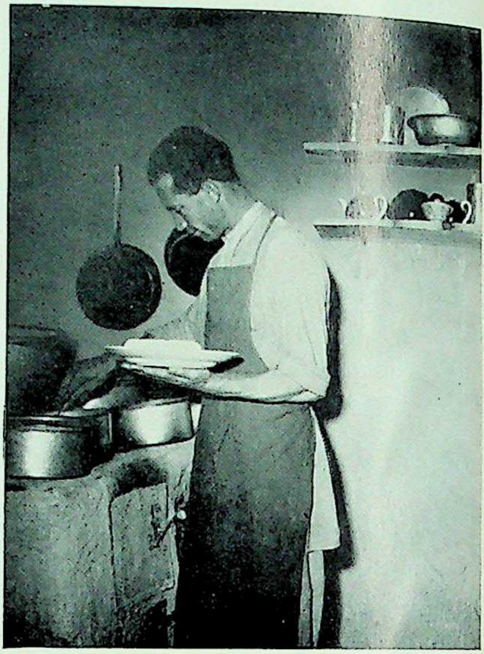


*Right:* Mashuk and Abdullah Jan about to share a pomegranate.

*Left:* These old men are washing potsherds. Pottery fragments provide one of the most reliable means of dating a site and all have to be cleaned and examined carefully.



*Left:* Every evening Mad Amin, the driver, lit the lamps.



*Right:* In the kitchen, like all our other camp buildings made of mud-pisé as was the wood-burning stove, Cook is seen preparing supper.

*Below:* Pyzullah shaves Ali-Ullah (note the chic hair style!) while a fellow-worker finds that a *tukri* can do effective duty as a washbowl.

and another £7 or £8 for water. And the hut would probably last as long as those we had been digging up on Mound B!

As soon as I was fit enough I was sent off with Mad Amin and Hassan on their bi-weekly trip to Kandahar. I had a fine excuse to visit the city, for my ear was still swollen and tender; moreover I was deaf. So I was only too eager to see the M-K Company's American doctor, the only European doctor in the province.

On the far side of Siah Sang Pass a cluster of low, black tents sprawled over the stony plain. Seven or eight massive hounds with heavy shoulders and snarling teeth flew at the station wagon and followed us for half a mile barking ferociously. Three small girls in dusty pink dresses drove a flock of fat-tailed sheep across the track to a hidden stream, and from the cooking fires at the entrance to the tents wizened old women, huddled in rusty black garments, peered at us suspiciously.

The Kuchhis were travelling the traditional caravan route to the Indus and for part of the way, as far as Kandahar, our roads were the same. We overtook several more groups with their camels all plodding steadily southwards, there to spend the cold winter months. Once we were in Kandahar the streets through which we drove, to my now countrified gaze, appeared wide and thronged with busy, sophisticated crowds. Mad Amin and Hassan left me at the Morrison-Knudsen compound and went off to do the marketing.

Here I learnt something about the American company that was almost the only evidence of democratic aid to Afghanistan. In the north there were plenty of Communist-sponsored projects, but here two great dams had been built in the Kandahar Valley in half the time scheduled for similar projects in Switzerland, despite the greater handicaps. The keystone of the Helmand Valley irrigation scheme was the Kajakai Dam built in the narrow gorge of the Helmand River about sixty miles north-east of Kandahar in the direction of Ghazni; the Arghandab Dam was built on the river of the same name, a tributary of the Helmand, and between them the two reservoirs would irrigate 750,000 acres of hitherto barren land. A vast web of canals was being built to carry the waters of the Helmand to newly-settled areas—or rather, to areas where the Afghan Government hoped to persuade Kuchhis to settle—and there was every chance this might once more become the "Garden of Afghanistan". Crops were being grown in demonstration and Kuchhis had been enticed to visit the experimental farm run by an agronomist from America.

Thinking of the transformation that even the next few years might see in this part of the desert, I drove back to Mundigak with a new awareness of my surroundings. The journey in the darkening night was long and cold and I tried to pass the time by exchanging vocabularies with Hassan and Mad Amin.

From the dark valley a tiny twinkle of light marked the camp for several miles before we bumped over the last mounds and wound along the last gulley to be greeted by the whole team. Jean-Marie's stooping figure was silhouetted against the doorway; Ginette, tiny and compact; Jacques with his untidy bird's-nest hair and beard and his out-at-elbows jacket, and Achour clutching the bottles of snakes to which he had been adding a newcomer. Even L'Idiot left his couch to run with gracefully waving tail and a welcoming bark.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# *Back to the Trenches*

FOR THE NEXT few days I sat outside the mess cataloguing and typing. One lunchtime I noticed that the workmen had formed a half circle by the storeroom, and one man was winding a black turban round his baggy trouser legs, spiral fashion, to end at the back in a long "tail". He had twisted a piece of stiff blue cloth into a dunce's cap and made himself a mock gun from a stick looped with another turban. I joined the circle of men and found that the actor was Piyundah from Mound A, a lean, cynical-looking man who surprised me by his readiness to play the fool and raise a laugh from his fellows.

Piyundah had an inseparable companion, black-bearded Madarib. Often during a break at their job on the dig, Piyundah and Madarib would sit on a wall pretending to be mother and child, with Piyundah sobbing on Madarib's shoulder, and Madarib alternately comforting and slapping his obstreperous "baby". This act never failed to bring rounds of applause and laughter from an appreciative audience that should have been hard at work!

At midday they could relax legitimately, and there in the front row of the circle sat handsome Nasruddin strumming away on a two-stringed *detara* as the Afghans called it—it is the same as the Baluchi *damboura*; a crudely-made lute fashioned from a gourd covered with parchment and with a long, roughly-carved wooden neck, it is tuned in fifths and struck only with the fingers of the right hand to give the tonic or dominant notes of the song, and to keep the beat. When I asked if I could examine it more closely, Nasruddin handed it over willingly enough but warned me not to touch the strings.

"*Tu mariz ast, Khanum Sahib?*" and he indicated my aching ear. I agreed that I was still not well and the ear was still swollen.

"Then touch not the *detara*—it will be bad for it if you are ill."

I supposed they believed I would communicate my sickness to the instrument, so I was careful to handle only the gourd, resisting the temptation to pluck the strings. When I handed it back, everyone drew a sigh of relief.

The party was warming up, with Piyundah prancing in the middle of the circle, pulling extraordinary faces, wagging his "tail" and every now and then rushing straight at me, shaking his "gun" in my face.

"Piyundah *shaitan ast*," explained Sirdar, indicating the pointed cap and the tail. "He is the Devil!"

When at last Piyundah stopped twirling and leaping and uttering wild cries I felt more exhausted than he looked. Everyone turned to me with anxious faces.

"Was it good, *Khanum Sahib*? You liked it?"

They all seemed to have a tremendous amount of surplus energy considering that even at this time of year the sun was very strong at midday. Hefty, manly Sirdar was particularly adept at imitating a dancing girl, twitching his shoulders coyly, covering his face with a shawl, mincing, twirling on his toes and fluttering his hands, the stubble of beard an incongruous dark shadow between the folds of the shawl.

Sometimes half a dozen men would whirl round, dancing the *Attan* in single file, with tossing heads and waving arms; or six or seven couples would take off their caps and turbans, hitch up their baggy trousers and begin a bout of wrestling which they called *paihlewan*. Each man put his arms round the other and taking a good hold on each side of the trouser tops, hooked one foot round the other's ankle, trying to topple his opponent. To win, a man had to pin the other's two shoulders to the ground.

Another favourite game was *ghursai*. You held your left foot in your right hand and hopping on the other foot, raced an opponent, or by variation, tried to knock him over—as I grew stronger I was urged to try *ghursai* racing, but I put up a very poor show against the villagers.

Once back at work I supervised Ginette's site for a few days as it was now her turn to feel unwell. Lucky for us she soon recovered, but in the meantime I was welcomed to work by Piyundah and Madarib.

"Was the 'devil' good, *Khanum Sahib*?" asked Madarib, reminding me of Piyundah's performance a few days earlier.

"*Besyar khub, Baba*," I assured him.

There came a roar of laughter and Madarib laughed loudest of all, stroking his thick black beard. For "Baba" means grandfather, a term of affectionate respect for an elderly man, and subconsciously I had always thought of Madarib in this respect, though in reality he was only about forty years old. "Baba" Madarib now crowed and clucked as though he was an entire fussing hen farm, while Piyundah, taking his cue from Madarib as usual, picked up a shovel and pretended to play it like a *detara*. Above the mud-brick wall appeared the face of one of our less comely workmen, watching this performance with fascination. At sight of him, Piyundah dropped his shovel and reached up to stroke Akram's astonished, gnarled countenance.

"Ah, for me Akram is like a beautiful flower!" Piyundah observed sentimentally.

The "flower" disappeared from view hastily and picked up a bowl of earth to make good his escape while I sent Piyundah back to his shovelling.

The new layer we had reached required puzzling out. We were pulling down the thick wall on Mound A that had formed the base of the second set of columns Ginette had found, and meanwhile the wall backing on to the original colonnade and therefore earlier than the colonnade itself was also being removed, piece by piece, very delicately, so as not to damage the columns.

That afternoon we suffered from a really ferocious sandstorm with dust devils whirling in all directions, and from their midst Haji Hashim Khan made a sudden entrance like a djinn in a pantomime.

A few days earlier we had had a strike—a very gentlemanly affair but nevertheless a down-tools. Haji Hashim Khan, being the overlord of the valley, was now to give a little lecture, for which purpose Jean-Marie allowed the men to stop work for ten minutes. Since the Governor's word was law in this area, there was little doubt about the instigator of the strike, but whatever we suspected there must be no loss of face involved for anyone, so a new wage increase was agreed upon and the men promised there would be no more strikes. However, the funds of the expedition were fixed so the wage increase meant that we would have to curtail the dig by at least a week. It meant also that our unskilled carriers of excavated earth were now getting more money than semi-skilled labour employed by the American construction company in Kandahar!

Everyone would have to work twice as hard to try and get the work finished before the funds ran out.

Next day I went back to my own site which had lain deserted for weeks. My old gang had meantime been split up among other workplaces and I sat in a strangely quiet and tidy five-thousand-year-old house, finishing the section I had begun to draw so long ago. One by one as I sat there, the men sneaked over to welcome me back with flattering greetings.

"*Ana, Khanum Sahib*?" offered Mahmad Mir, a quiet, clean-shaven Popalzai from Aroorkh village. His green eyes twinkled as he produced the rosy pomegranate from the sleeve of his patched and ragged *chupan*. Like many of the tribesmen he owned or had a share in a small orchard; almost all our workmen were smallholders whose land was being worked by relatives while they spent the season on the more profitable dig.

When I started digging again on my site there were only three of my original team among the new gang I was allotted—Sirdar of the loud voice, Mashuk the pick-man, and cross-eyed, knock-kneed Njamtullah. Between them Sirdar and Mashuk taught me the first two verses of their favourite song, "Tomorrow when I am dead, you must come to my grave. . . ". I knew the tune already for they sang it incessantly, day after day, but now I repeated the words after them, writing them down with the music.

Their interest in my family, my doings, my reaction to their way of life, never flagged; every day too, there were gifts—deliciously juicy pomegranates still wearing their glossy green leaves; the corner of a grubby turban would be untied to reveal a handful of dried raisins, pale-yellow and dark-purple, plump and sweet; sometimes

Mashuk would arrive wearing two or three necklaces of dried apricots strung together in rows of a hundred and fifty, which he sold to his fellows but lavishly pressed whole handfuls on me as a gift—"*Baksheesh* for you, *Khanum Sahib!*"

Sirdar would reach into the long sleeve of his ankle-length white felt *khosai* with its raised pattern of embroidery or appliqué work over the back, on the shoulders and down the front. All kinds of articles were carried in these sleeves that were sewn up at the wrists—bread, *nal* flutes, pomegranates and pale-yellow carrots that had been scraped clean of their beetroot-coloured skins.

Energetically Sirdar imitated the beating of the felt on stones—this was woman's work and they fashioned the goathair into squares, then sewed them into shape. In Baluchistan these same ankle-length overcoats were known as *zor* and worn like cloaks, the hem-length sleeves bulging with their contents swinging as the wearer strode along keeping the coat over his shoulder with his fingers tucked into two little "pockets" sewn inside the coat edges at chest level. Except that they were very heavy, these coats were first-class for winter weather, keeping out cold and wet alike.

Sirdar had introduced his hazel-eyed cousin Fazal into my new gang. A lad of about sixteen, he made it his self-appointed duty to bring me a daily offering of raisins and dried mulberries—"from Haji Khan's garden," he confided one day—stolen fruits certainly seemed to be sweetest! Often I was given marigold posies, the flowers all bitten off an inch below the heads. Most Afghans would tuck a flower into their turbans or behind one ear, but never think of putting the blooms into a vase of water.

So amid a growing accumulation of gifts, I continued working on my site desperately trying to get as much as possible done to make up for the time I had neglected it during the weeks of illness. I was finding a confusion of walls and floors. One massive wall continued down for several metres right across a corner of my site; all the way down the wall's depth other small walls ran off at right angles; first there were two medium-sized rooms; under these one large room with its outer walls at slightly different angles; then the large room became three small ones; doors appeared complete with hollowed-out doorstones; pestles and mortars were distributed with astonishing abandon by the side of hearths, with waterpots and stores of burnt grain; beads, knives and hundreds of potsherds were collected daily. The three rooms changed once more. Beneath them mysterious excrescences arose; were they walls? No, we decided and dug through them, then wondered whether perhaps they had been walls after all. If so, where had they been going and for what purpose? What did it all mean? That was the puzzle. It was only at the end of the dig that we found an unmistakable staircase winding up from the earliest level of all, and realized that we had in fact destroyed the much-mutilated top of the staircase in the upper levels, where thousands of years before it had been deliberately flattened to form the foundations for a new building.

I was glad that mine was not the responsibility of interpreting the dig. I had, of course, to try to interpret my own section, but thank goodness there was always Jean-Marie to confirm or refute my theories.

On Mound A, in an effort to speed up the work, Jacques was doing a double job of supervising a small work-site and surveying the entire dig. He had found a room whose floor still bore the clear impression of the reed mats laid upon it somewhere about 3,000 B.C. When it was first uncovered the marks of the matting were as fresh as though the mats themselves had never disintegrated, mats that from their pattern must have been almost exactly the same as those woven today and which we were using in our cabins. A little later Jacques found two hearths in his room, together with a doorstep still bearing the marks of red-ochre paint and a doorstone still in position by the entrance.

The depth of the site had increased considerably by now and it was time for me to add a few more levels to the section I had been drawing. Intent on the drawing board and measurements, I kept only half an eye on the gang and it was not until an irate roar from Jean-Marie nearly startled me off my wall, that I realized the newcomers in the gang had been taking advantage of my preoccupation. Jean-Marie had come upon them unexpectedly and caught them emptying their *tukris* of earth just out of my sight round the side of the mound of excavated soil that had grown up a few yards away, instead of walking to the very end of the heap. The first law of a well-run site is to keep your verges clear—ours had to be kept clear for more than the normal distance since we knew the site stretched all around us. There is always the possibility that the dig will be extended later on and no one wants to move mounds of rubbish first.

Blushing with shame at having allowed so flagrant and elementary a breach of regulations I tried to explain to my disgruntled gang just why they must walk a long way to the far end of the mound.

Sirdar saw the point at once and hitching up his black *purtak* he grabbed a shovel and began moving the dump with terrific energy; the others soon followed his example and it didn't take long for the whole mound to be moved several yards back. I never found difficulty in getting whole-hearted co-operation so long as the men understood the reason for their orders, but so many people seem to think it beneath their dignity to make any kind of explanation to a servant or a workman.

The queue of patients outside Ginette's hut every evening was as long as ever. This particular day they were augmented by a small group of black-shrouded village women. As soon as Ebrahim called out *Khalas!* Bir Bakyir, my shoveller, ran down the hillside to the women and took a tiny boy in his arms. With a mixture of pride and sorrow he showed me the pale, unhappy little face beneath its embroidered cap, and the half-closed, weary little eyes.

"But *alors*, you must take the baby to the hospital in Kandahar—there is something very wrong with its eyes," said Ginette sharply as she saw the child. There was now a clinic with two United Nations' nurses in Kandahar, and a visiting doctor. Ebrahim translated Ginette's orders and Bakyir looked distressed.

"*Khanum Sahib*, that we have done but the Hakim says it is too late!"

We felt quite helpless. Bakyir was still convinced that if only we would try we could restore his son's failing sight where doctors had failed. Ginette offered to give him a letter to the doctor if that would help, but sadly shaking his head, Bakyir wrapped the child in a shawl and handed him to one of the anxious women. With them was a youth who could speak only in a painful whisper—his throat disease also was far beyond our simple first-aid kit, and it was a pathetic little group that moved slowly away with the one small grey ass; Bakyir bent double for his wife, wrapped in her black shawl, to step on to his back and from there to the red blanket covering the donkey. The child was handed up to her and carefully Bakyir drew the rest of the red blanket from the animal's haunches and wrapped it round the shoulders of mother and child.

Then accompanied by the two other black-shrouded women and the sick youth, they plodded back to the village of Mundigak, a touchingly Biblical group.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# *Kraits and Green Tea*

"OUR" KUCHHIS WERE back again in the neighbourhood, although their tents were out of sight. The chief men of the tribe would ride up to us on horseback and watch us at work. They were tall and good-looking, with long hair and exquisitely embroidered garments edged with turquoise and white beads.

Jacques was busy surveying the dig with the help of a slender Baluch youth, Yar Khan, who carried the levelling poles and plane tables. Meanwhile we had finished work on my site and I had been moved to the end of a long extension begun by Maricq to see how far buildings extended on the mound—we were finding they continued to the edge of the hill so now we were on the final task of the season. With Ebrahim at one end and my team at the other, we were breaking down the wide balk that had been left between the extension and the main part of the dig.

Even when removing something like this, work is still carried out layer by layer, although the temptation is to knock the whole thing down with one big bash. At our end we had removed the top soil and the first layers and at a depth of some four feet had come across a series of enormous storage jars at the very end of the twenty-five-yard-long balk, just where everyone had to step up and down from the edge of the dig. The jars, about two feet six inches high, stood in a row, some completely undamaged save for a piece of rim that had fallen inside the pot; others cracked or broken by the pressure of earth, but all with the pieces in place. In removing these jars care had to be taken to equalize the pressure by taking the earth from inside the vessels at the same rate as the earth surrounding them; as soon as the jar was sufficiently freed, a webbing of strong string was tied around it as an additional safeguard, while the long-buried vessel dried out in the sun for a day or two. Only when it was quite dry could it be lifted safely out of its hole.

I had been working for nearly two days on the first of the jars, suspecting there were more to come, but concentrating on getting out the first intact before satisfying my curiosity. In fact, it seemed we were uncovering a potter's shop for all the vessels were in a new, unused condition. I lifted out a small, complete bowl from inside the larger vessel and had my arm half-way down the jar, removing the soil inside by handfuls; suddenly I felt something move in the cool darkness of the pot. Almost before I could withdraw my hand a thin, whippy, sand-coloured snake shot up as though stung. Of course we often came across the creatures in course of digging but it did not occur to me that there might be one just there. It was as surprised as I was, but as soon as the workmen saw it they threw stones and pieces of potsherd in wild abandon to kill the krait.

For a moment I had just stared as though paralysed, but as the stones fell dangerously near the jar I instinctively shielded it with my body. I had not been toiling for two days to remove the jar intact, only to have it broken by over-enthusiastic concern for my life! The snake was far more scared than I was and made off like lightning, to the disgust of Achour, who was hoping for another addition to our Pasteur collection—but the jar was still intact.

Had there been a tarantula inside it would have been me that ran away, but snakes never scared me as much as the most harmless little house spider.

We manoeuvred the jar safely to the storage room and started work on the other jars. It was a tricky business jumping down to the loose, crumbling wall without damaging the vessels on the corner or knocking the edges of the balk, and so making useless for dating purposes any small finds knocked over the edge, not to mention disfiguring the carefully cleaned chamber with its walls still standing some eight feet high, immediately below us. Almost as though they knew of my encounter with the snake, a couple of snake-charmers arrived on the site that afternoon. Their presence was heralded by the sound of high-pitched flutes floating across the still air from the trench Ebrahim was digging.

Squatting on the ground, sheltered by the dig walls, were two strange-looking characters, *Margirs* as the men called them. They had come down from the nearby hills and their garments were just a mass of tatters patched with many colours and hung about, like their deep-crowned round caps, with pieces of discoloured mirror, cloth amulets, blue beads and feathers sewn wherever the ragged cloth would take the string.

"*Margirs* need no money," Achour told me. "They wander all over Afghanistan and people feed them and give them money or clothes or food to catch snakes in their homes."

*Margirs* are also paid to do the sort of snake-charming act that they were demonstrating now, with a wooden boxful of snakes, including cobras, they had caught in the nearby mountains. One man played a double-flute—not like the traditional Indian snake-charmer's flute with a bulge in the middle, but more akin to the *algozhar* of the Baluchis, producing a raucous steady noise with no suspicion of movement or the swaying that is generally believed to encourage snakes to "dance". Meanwhile, his companion tipped the snakes from their box and prodded them into action, a tangle of smooth, black cobras with tiny heads that inflated to the familiar hood when they were teased. The *Margirs* told lurid stories of a certain gorge in the mountain range behind us where they had charmed snakes so enormous that they made noises like horses.

Goggle-eyed, we gathered to watch the men tapping the writhing snakes with their fingers or catching them behind the heads and waving them in the air. Then, when they had finished their act for us, they moved across to Mound A for a repeat performance.

I went back to my storage jars and delved more cautiously than before. This time I found a mass of long, bronze nails entwined together—later they were treated chemically and separated. Mashuk had found a perfect little female figurine just a few inches away from the jars. The statuette was only two inches long, but she wore a crude though well-defined necklace and beads arranged about her formally-gathered locks that provoked an admiring cry of "Oo, la la!" from Sirdar. This was probably a private fertility goddess belonging to a farmer. Not far away from this we found two small "brandy balloons" decorated with peepul (the wild fig) leaves, and several alabaster handles like hollowed-out tubes, shaped to the grip. These handles were exactly the same as the drill handles used today by the craftsmen who fashion beads for the Shah Maqsud rosaries.

This had been an exciting morning, what with snakes and *Margirs* and goddesses and "brandy balloons", but there was more to come. I was wearing the heavy-soled, curly-toed shoes bought in the Kabul bazaar and as I climbed down on to the balk I caught the toe of one shoe and fell headlong to the bottom of the small room some fourteen or fifteen feet below. For a moment, everything was hidden in the swirling cloud of soil that rose above my head and I lay half-stunned at the bottom. The dig was uncannily silent for an instant, then through the settling dust peered the faces of my gang, distress and horror written on every countenance.

With cries of consternation and calls to Allah, Sirdar asked if I were dead.

Luckily I had fallen on soft earth and the only damage done was a few bruises and scratches resulting in a somewhat stiff gait for the next few days. With the help of willing hands I got to my feet and we began to clear away the debris.

Looking up to the angle of the balk, where it joined the main side of the site, I saw something pale pink in colour just catching the edge of the light.

Carefully balancing on the wall, I reached up and dug it out with my knife. I stared incredulously and the men gathered round, regarding it with awe. It must have been the first time they had ever seen such a realistic representation of the female form, complete with legs, for it was a perfect little statuette about five inches high, made of a light pink terracotta. It was unlike anything we had found before and certainly as far removed from the crude, pinched figurines of fertility goddesses (or whatever they were that we had been finding so far), as a piece of Venetian glass from a sixpenny tumbler. With a beautifully formed body, it was of a nude woman, heavy-hipped, reclining on her knees, her legs bent under her and to one side. The arms however were still no more than stumps—a definite link with the cruder figurines here—and alas, there was no head. It was an old break, and search as we might there was no sign of it anywhere.

The tremendous excitement of finding something really unusual is almost impossible to communicate: day after day you spend on dull, unrewarding digging and recording and then suddenly, quite by accident, you stumble upon a treasure. That, of course, is part of the fascination of archaeology; it is, in fact, a continuous treasure-hunt and like the carrot dangled before the donkey's nose, there is always the possibility of finding something quite fabulous with the next turn of the spade. Even the most sedate and academic of archaeologists must surely experience this thrill, however much he may try to disguise it.

Nobody at Mundigak ever tried to hide his excitement and my fortuitous discovery was hailed with gratifying pleasure. It had been a wonderful day, for besides the large jars and the statuette there had been a series of small figurines as crude as the earlier ones we had found, but all in better condition, plus a bull still bearing traces of paint, and some fine "brandy balloons".

Next day, Jean-Marie was searching through the baskets of washed pottery from an adjoining site when he found the torso of a similar statuette in the same hard, pale pink terracotta, with an arm and a realistic hand but, alas, a fresh break at the neck. Because the basket was labelled it was possible to tell exactly which layer on which part of the dig the statuette came from, but search as we might, sifting through all the earth thrown away that day, the head never came to light.

As if to compensate for the loss of the head, however, Ebrahim uncovered a large storage jar on his side of the balk, set at the same level as mine, in the angle of a landing at the top of a little staircase. And what a jar! It was the only one of its size and shape found on the dig and it was decorated with the typically Quetta-ware "stepped" motif of the merlons over the colonnade, painted in diamond shapes, one inside the other, in black, white and a bright yellow that rubbed off as soon as it was touched. Only the rim was missing and even that was discovered later, fallen inside the jar. The only other fragment bearing this yellow paint had been a tiny scrap of sherd; here, as always seems to happen on digs, some of the most significant finds of the season had been made within the last few days, making it that much more disappointing when the time came to stop work.

Soon it was almost December, and the last Friday but one for us at Mundigak, with only one more week of work. Never had the country seemed more lovely or peaceful. Mornings were cold but still, the mountains bathed in a golden glow; sheep and goats grazed contentedly on the scanty vegetation and the whole valley was drenched in a golden-green radiance. In the evenings L'Idiot would sit silhouetted against the darkening skyline, the breeze blowing through his silky ears and tail, or the sun behind him casting an aureole round his head as he sat gravely staring into space.

Outside our cabins that Friday morning I encountered Ramazan leading a small black kid with enchanting fawn ears, minute horns and enormous brown eyes.

"What do you do with the wool?" Ginette was asking. "Are *posteens* made with it?" and she ran her fingers through the little kid's curly black coat.

"No, *Khanum Sahib*, *posteens* come from lambs—this makes *khosais*—felt coats—and tents."

After breakfast Jacques went off shooting but the rest of us piled into the station wagon to look for the Kuchhi chieftain with the three hundred tents.

We drove through Mundigak village and then on to the dried-up river bed whose smoothed track made a superb road. There was no sign of Kuchhis as we twisted along the channel and passed the dig away on our right. Then at last, in a bend of the river we glimpsed a group of sprawling black tents—not three hundred nor anything like it. Perhaps twenty at the most. A dozen dust-coloured mastiffs had snarled themselves into a fight and we waited on the river bed while they were pacified and secured before we walked towards the largest of the tents, a flock of children round our feet.

The front of the tent was open, supported by willowy canes, and eight or nine elderly men were sitting on carpets smoking a hookah set on a patch of bare ground in the middle of the group. The pipe was a large one with a turquoise base and an elaborately beaded stem. Soft Herat rugs were spread inside the tent and after the first greetings a place was made for us at the back of the tent next to the chieftain who was reclining against a high pile of carpets.

It was dark at the back of the tent and we peered and stumbled our way over the crossed feet of the tribesmen, only to trip over a baby lamb running frantically in circles round the central tent-pole to which it had been tethered by a long, plaited rope.

At last we settled ourselves on the rugs, Jean-Marie tucking his long legs under him with surprising ease, Ginette curling up like a kitten, and the tribal elders moving up closer to make room.

The opening conversational gambits were made by our "chieftain", Jean-Marie, and the Kuchhi, who was not our wealthy, handsome young man after all but a good-looking, middle-aged man with grey eyes and a European overcoat covering his embroidered tribal dress. Gradually as we sat there, the darkness lifted as an ancient crone in rusty black garments, her hair hanging in thin matted plaits, moved round the outside of the tent and with the help of several younger, timid girls, raised the felt flaps to extend the seating accommodation as well as to let in daylight and air.

The younger women were hidden from our view, all but their legs and feet, and now they moved away, but with the privilege of the aged, the black-garbed old woman crept into the back to squat behind me and untwist the two-week old lamb, no bigger than a large cat, by now wound tightly against the pole and almost choking to death in panic.

Preliminary introductions over, we made inquiries about "our" Kuchhis and found they had already left for Kandahar. The Chieftain spoke some Persian and now he explained that his own tribe were Ghilzais from Gurmsyl. By tradition, the Ghilzais believe they are descended from Noah through Zohak whose children fled from Persia to escape from Faridan. The refugees are supposed to have settled in Ghor, a mountainous district of the Hari Rud in Seistan, and one of their descendants married the daughter of a Ghor chieftain. Anthropologists give the Ghilzais more prosaic and recent origin and say they are probably of Turkish stock. In any case the Ghilzai story seemed rather mixed up—the only Faridan I could trace was the famous Persian druggist and mystical poet of the twelfth-thirteenth centuries A.D. whose full name was Ferid Eddin Attar.

Behind me next to the old woman, a beautiful young man had quietly settled himself—I really mean beautiful. With curly locks parted in the middle, side curls caressing his smooth cheeks and one silver ear-ring in his right ear, he was unusually decorative. His smock was a rich rose madder, intricately stitched with white silk and turquoise beads and small round mirrors. His *sardri*, the embroidered waistcoat, was of ruby velvet with gold and silver trimmings.

The Chieftain looking at him slyly, made a remark that brought appreciative laughter from the men around us.

"He says that the beautiful young man is much like you," Jean-Marie translated to me.

The youth blushed and hung his head, I blushed and grinned, and the rest of the company laughed at the good joke, looking with delight from one to the other of us.

Over green tea thickened with a residue of sand we were pressed to stay to a meal. Food was here, food was ready, food was exceedingly good. Jean-Marie replied with courtesy that he had no doubt that the food was good, but another time we would stay, when the Ghilzais came this way again. Today we must return to our camp. Before we left, the old woman at the back of the tent was persuaded to unwrap some of the mysterious bundles serving as a backrest for us. With glowing pride she produced samples of Kuchhi embroidery, her gnarled old fingers caressing them lovingly. Using me as a model, she tried on the yokes and bodices exquisitely worked on grubby cotton. The women worked the cuffs, edges and yokes of the smocks separately in neat, flat stitches, using mainly bright-red and blue thread, although one lovely set had been stitched in an unusual colour scheme of golden brown, dark brown and green. The pieces were then appliquèd to shirts and pants, removed when the garments were worn out and sewn again on to new clothes. It is true the seamstresses were apt to continue the patterns in entirely different shades and the patterns themselves rarely balanced—one side of a yoke would have six little mirrors let into the stitches, the other side perhaps only one or two.

The *pièce de résistance* was drawn with loving care from folds of cloth. It was a wedding yoke, stiff with gold and silver embroidery and the old woman pulled it enthusiastically over my head and flung her arms around me, hugging me to her bony old bosom and giggling with pleasure. The slit opening that in a man's dress comes over one breast, produced more laughter from the audience, and showing her blackened teeth in a broad smile, the old woman turned the yoke back to front, with the opening decently over my shoulder-blades.

The pieces of embroidery still lay in a heap before us. Ginette and I emptied Jean-Marie's pockets of all his money and bought sets of collars, cuffs and yokes, most of them bearing the unmistakable aroma of their former wearers. The handsome grey-eyed little boys and dusty-faced girls with their chopped-off straight hair hung about with silver and turquoise ornaments gathered round us wide-eyed as we made our way out of the tent into the brilliant sun. The ancient crone bustled up to me with a needle and thread and with a great deal of pother sewed a medallion on to my shirt—a large, five-Afghani silver piece which is no longer minted, and in the middle of it, a crude red stone set like some precious jewel. The whole was attached to a ribbon of turquoise beads and mirrorwork. With the air of a monarch bestowing the Grand Order of the Kuchhis, the old woman stood back to admire her handiwork and flourish her needle triumphantly.

Jean-Marie was wandering around, offering cigarettes to the men. At first they refused as orthodox Muslims should, then shyly, one by one, they accepted, smoking through clenched fists so that the tobacco would not touch their lips. One of the men seemed to have a small flute sticking out of his waistcoat pocket, and since I am always intrigued by local handicrafts and music, I asked him to play it for me.

"But this is a pipe to smoke, a *chilum*," he explained patiently, pulling it out of his pocket.

Then I saw for myself—it was very small, the stem like the brass stem of a small flute but with a bowl attached to one end, carved from a piece of bone bearing a pattern of concentric circles with a dot in the centre of each, and straight lines dividing the circles. This was exactly like the patterns I had been finding on a scrap of bone in Mound B, and also like the bone or ivory playing discs from Sirkap, Taxila, on the North-west Frontier, which were dated between the second century B.C. and the first century A.D. The bowl was attached to the stem by a length of stiff beadwork, the very counterpart of those made today in some parts of Macedonia, even to the diamond pattern picked out in white beads. What strange mixture of origins had given birth to this particular style of pipe, I wondered.

We were walking back to the station wagon when the old woman pulled imperiously at my arm, dragging me to a nearby tent full of women; old women like herself in rusty black, young ones in gay red gowns half-hidden by black shawls, small girls peacock-decked in silver trinkets. I had to sit down while they admired—or at least, examined, my clothing and I admired theirs. Inevitably the sick and ailing began creeping up to ask for *dewai*—medicine, no matter if it was only coloured water. Ginette came across with her small portable medicine chest and I strolled round the camp with my camera—nobody minded when I took photographs—indeed, they rushed to be included!

Strange how the reputation of unfriendliness had arisen. As we chatted to these warm, hospitable, simple folk, it was hard to credit that some travellers had found them truculent. Yet before the season ended, we were to learn that not all were as friendly as those we had so far encountered.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Last Days on the Dig

THERE WAS A party feeling in the air as we took our coffee outside the cabin after lunch and immediately afterwards drove to Shah Maqsud. The Muslims in our party wanted to make a last prayer at the shrine; Ginette and Achour were going to visit another small Kuchhi encampment they had spotted, and I was to pay a long-promised visit to Sirdar's home at Sheerga.

First stop was Shah Maqsud and as we passed through Chenar village, out streamed a succession of our workmen, all running madly towards us waving their arms and yelling to us to stop. Ahead, by the side of the track, a lorry that had been carrying them with several dozen other pilgrims to the shrine lay half in a ditch, the driver and his mate both looking helplessly at the wreckage—and it takes nothing less than a complete wreck to dismay an Afghan driver who is usually able to make anything move if it has four wheels and a piece of string to hold it together.

Excitedly the men scrambled into the back of the truck, joining Achour and Jacques and the servants who were standing, holding on to the wooden planks nailed along the sides. So our entrance into Shah Maqsud took the form of a triumphal progress, the crowd in the back waving and shouting happily to the pilgrims gathered outside the mosque.

Prayers over, Ebrahim rejoined us and we retraced our route past Chenar to the tiny Kuchhi encampment just off the main road, and a track to Sheerga to the east.

We left Ginette and Achour—only later did we learn that they had stumbled on the first unfriendly Kuchhis any of us had encountered. These were carpet weavers and Ginette had wanted to study their craft, but the nomads threatened to set the watchdogs on both of them and with surly looks and shouts drove them away. A few days later two of the same Kuchhis came to the camp to ask Ginette for medicine, which of course she gave, but not before Ebrahim had delivered a sharp homily about returning good for evil.

However, the rest of us had gone on to Sheerga, to be greeted by a group of small boys playing in the dust. They led us down the narrow lanes, past Haji Hashim Khan's imposing establishment with its high mud-brick walls, and round the back to the dried-up bed of a stream fringed with mulberry trees. The late afternoon sun glowed through the golden leaves and cast long, slanting shadows on the banks and across the stream; little specks of distant men ploughed the land with teams of black oxen; beyond them the restful green of fruit trees stirred lazily above mud-brick walls.

"*Ho! Sirdara!*" called one of the small boys, and with a scrambling and a scuffling, a comically astonished Sirdar appeared on top of the low wall, his look of incredulity changing to a tremendous, welcoming smile. Although he had for weeks been inviting me to visit him it was obvious he had never expected me to come.

"May you never be hungry, may you never be tired—you are healthy? You are happy?"

We greeted each other joyfully and Ebrahim and the others left me to join their own friends, while Sirdar led me through a gap in the wall to a small yard. One side of it was occupied by a small mud-pisé hut thatched with leaves and reeds, the whole only about six feet high and perhaps ten feet wide and fifteen long.

Outside on the ground lay a rug and a bolster where the family had been sunning themselves. I was urged through the low doorway into the blackness of the cabin, a cabin full of people and smoke. When I got used to the atmosphere and the dim light, I made out a glowing fire in the middle of the floor—there was no hole in the roof for the smoke, its only exit being the doorway. Over the fire a middle-aged woman in black was stirring an appetizing stew in a huge black witches' cauldron. Sirdar's mother welcomed me with a shy smile, and two of his sisters spread rugs and cushions for me by the door. Sirdar himself, bubbling over with importance and hospitality, alternated between apologies for his poor home and explanations that he would have been waiting for me by the main road, but that he was very sick—here he groaned artistically, rubbing his shoulders to show me how bad he was.

I accepted his explanations at their face value, and watched his mother cooking; a few minutes later Sirdar came in, bending almost double under the weight of an enormous yellow melon which he placed in my lap for inspection, then laid on a shelf behind me. "It is *baksheesh* for you, *Khanum*—tomorrow I will bring it for you."

Mother began to knead dough on a wooden platter. She was a Rakshani Baluch like Nasruddin, Yar Jan and Adil Mahmud, all of whom lived near by in what was a tiny pocket of Baluchis. Winking and smiling, Sirdar made sure I was watching the cookery demonstration. These were cakes which he would bring me tomorrow, he promised. Spread on the floor was a heap of drying meat, chicken and lamb. This was food that they would prepare in my honour, added Sirdar, really letting his imagination run riot. I knew as well as he did that the meat was being prepared for winter storage.

The girls had gathered round me shyly, watching every movement, and this seemed to be a good time to undo my little parcel and hand over the coloured scarves I had brought. One sister was a pretty child of eight, and another about fourteen had swiftly put on a new green smock and clutched a baby brother in her arms. A married sister was nursing a five months old baby tightly swaddled in strips of cloth that bound its tiny limbs immovably; even its head was wrapped in a handkerchief and a blanket bound so closely round the entire body that I wondered the baby could breathe at all.

I had brought dangling cherry-red earrings for Sirdar's mother and she stared at them, not knowing how to fasten the clips; for the smallest children I brought the ferociously-coloured sweets of Shah Maqsud.

Except for a shelf at one end of the hut, where bedding and odd bundles of clothing were stored, the room was empty of furnishings. None was needed here—there were quilts to sleep or lounge on, and bolsters to rest an elbow or head—what more was wanted? Nine people lived in this one airless room.

Reclining on the thinly-quilted *rezai*, I watched Sirdar's mother knead her pastry.

My meagre Pushtu vocabulary was exhausted long before, with smiles and handclasps all round, I got up to leave.

The men had gone outside after a few moments, and saying goodbye to the girls and Sirdar's mother, I, too, bent low and squeezed through the door and out into the yard where Sirdar was tethering the family cow and Abdul, his brother-in-law, was digging a hole. An ancient, white-bearded man, whom I took to be Sirdar's grandfather, trotted into the compound carrying a long pole across his shoulder.

"My father," explained Sirdar as he introduced us. With a sweet smile the old man greeted me, clasping my hands between his, then he went on with the task of erecting the tall pole in the hole and fastening a cross bar at the top. From this would hang the *landhi*, the dried meat that had been rubbed with salt and *hing* (asafoetida gathered in the hills—it was a pungent plant, like a very strong-smelling garlic) and which Sirdar had in his pardonable enthusiasm described as "the feast for you, *Khanum Sahib*". Landhi poles are erected outside most Afghan—and Baluch—houses, at the beginning of winter; they serve as cold weather larders.

Through the gap in the wall I could see the neighbouring huts and one or two low tents; it was a poor little settlement but seemed a happy one, the menfolk reclining on rugs in the last rays of the sun, exchanging gossip and contentedly smoking.

"*Ho, Shireen kaka* (Uncle Shireen)," called Sirdar lustily, and old Shireen the Sweet, his wrinkled face creased even more heavily as he smiled his toothless smile, came running to join us and to clasp my hands.

We left amid reluctant goodbyes and expressions of thanks, with Sirdar astride the wall waving, "Good morning, *Khanum Sahib*, good morning!" and I wandered back to the truck, joined by Ebrahim and the others. Suddenly over the edge of a high mud wall appeared a bulky, black turban and under it Mad Amin's cheerful countenance; he was on Haji Hashim Khan's flat roof and I must come up and join them. It was growing dark, but if the Governor knew I was in the village then I could not be so discourteous as to ignore him.

I was led through the small garden where he had entertained us a few weeks previously, and up an outside staircase to the roof of the guest-house where the Governor himself was reclining Pasha-like on rugs and bolsters, an elaborately embroidered white felt *khosai* over his knees, a turquoise hookah at his lips and a splendid view of the entire village before him, including the path to Sirdar's home.

I explained that Ginette and Achour would be waiting on the track for us to pick them up, but Haji Khan waved that excuse away imperiously. We must at least take tea with him, tea was all ready, which would I prefer, *torghum* (black) or *shnae chai* (green)?

It was green tea for me and while we waited, for of course, it was not really ready, I looked over the roof to the golden landscape and the garden below with its russet-leaved trees and mauve and white convolvulus climbing up to the roof. Tea and large green apples eventually arrived from the "big house" and then Haji Hashim Khan, smiling in his withdrawn fashion, asked if I was perhaps going to return to Afghanistan.

"You find Afghanistan agreeable, you like our people—perhaps you will come to live?" he suggested.

I agreed that I liked Afghanistan and her people very much indeed, that of course I hoped to come back. . . . "But you would not want to stay here, not here in Sheerga?" insisted Haji Khan. "You would rather live in your country? Supposing I came to your country. I would be safe? Or you would kill me. . .?"

I assured him we would do our best to show restraint but he laughed sardonically and shook his head disbelievingly. "No, no, you would kill me, I know that, you would kill me," he repeated, then changed the subject to Sirdar.

"He is a poor man, why do you visit such a poor man, *Khanum*?"

He was genuinely curious and seemed as surprised as Sirdar himself had been.

"He is poor but he is good," I replied unctuously, remembering a little late in the day that if Sirdar's own confession was to be believed, his quick temper had landed him in prison more than once.

Laden with apples that the Governor had insisted on giving me, I made my way at last back to the truck and a few minutes later we picked up Achour and Ginette who told us the story of their rough reception. It seemed that Ginette, admiring a little girl, had unthinkingly commented on her prettiness. It might have been this that upset these Kuchhis, although it had been done before, and by Kuchhis themselves—but only in reference to adults. In Baluchistan to draw attention to a child's good looks is to invite the jealous gods to put the evil eye upon it; aloud one described one's offspring as the ugliest, most unattractive in the world, however ravishing they might really be.

The sky behind was deep rose, and in front the palest turquoise and melon yellow; the needle-sharp serrated peaks of the mountains in silhouette looked as though some enormous, hungry mouse had been nibbling at them as we drove back to camp.

* * * *

Next morning Sirdar arrived early, sitting down outside my door. The huge melon was in his lap and he held a large silk handkerchief filled with a dozen round cakes that his mother had made the previous day. They tasted surprisingly good, sweet and crisp though a little dry. No, Sirdar would not share them, they were all for me, and his eyes filled quickly with sentimental tears as he urged me to eat, at the same time stuttering in his attempts to thank me for the gifts I had made his family. Apparently if you visit an Afghan's home without sharing a meal there, you must accept the food he sends you afterwards, and not offer anything in return.

Sirdar, normally much too proud to carry the baskets of sherds from the dig to the camp, this day bent over backwards to do the most menial tasks. We had been finding so much pottery that the baskets were filling faster than we could replace them, but Sirdar was eager to carry them all.

"This to the house, *Khanum*?" he would ask, picking up yet another basket.

With a passionate outburst he heaved two baskets into his arms and said:

"You ask me to carry these to Sheerga and I carry them; ask me to carry them to Kandahar, and I carry them—I carry them wherever you say, *Khanum*!"

It seemed that my visit had honoured his family more than I could ever have imagined.

We were again puzzling over the dig. The great balk had gone and I was clearing the last of the chambers flanking it. A funny little "L"-shaped wall only two feet high, attached to the main entrance of a house, had me worried.

"It can't be a wall," said Jean-Marie pushing his khaki planter's hat to the back of his head and rubbing his ear reflectively. "Where does it go to, what does it do? What purpose can it serve? It is pointless; no, no, it cannot be a wall."

I began to break down the end of it, yet Jean-Marie was obviously not fully convinced that my wall was imaginary—I myself was positive it was no invention. Inside the "L" the ground was stamped to a smooth, hard floor, and in the middle of the outer wall of the house to which it was attached there now appeared a doorway and a step.

(The explanation came later, on our way back to Kabul when we were walking through Ghazni, under the great battlements. Jean-Marie clutched at my arm to point out a house clinging to the skirts of the ramparts. "Look!" he exclaimed. "There is your wall of Mundigak—see, now we know what it meant!"

Attached to the outer wall of the house was practically a replica of the little low "L" that had puzzled us so much, and within it, two cows contentedly munching their fodder.)

The last week at Mundigak was a jumble of visits from our Ghilzai Kuchhis with more trinkets and embroidery for us to buy. Jean-Marie was busily photographing the most important of the small finds and packing the pottery in straw and cotton wool; the large jar with the yellow, black and white pattern had to be left at Mundigak until next season for lack of a case big enough to take it.

There was a bitter-sweet sadness about the whole kaleidoscopic week: Bismullah's high-pitched, rather sweet, plaintive voice as he crooned to himself, scraping away at a wall; Sirdar's lusty song and his suddenly sentimental tones as he sang out, "Good-morning, *Khanum Sahib!*"; Fazul imitating Achour's mock-angry commands —"*Buro, buro, itaruf; chimi kuni, Bachha?*"; Ali Gwul rolling his eyes inside out and demanding, "*Mussalman ast? Tu Mussalman ast?*"; Mashuk pretending to be dead, lying full-length on a wall, his face covered with his turban while the rest of the gang stood with cupped hands, holding a mock funeral service; Nasruddin strumming on his *detara* and suddenly snatching off his embroidered cap to show me a perfectly bald head, completely shaven so that he looked like a film star playing the part of the "King of Siam".

There was a small boy with a black turban and blue *purtak* and *qamis*, leading a plump, golden, fat-tailed sheep wearing a string of bells around its woolly neck. The sound of a goat-herd piping a melancholy tune as he wandered gently across the unexcavated mounds; the large man with a henna'd beard who came to see us, a rifle over one shoulder, his long legs straddling a very small donkey garlanded with bells and blue beads.

I noticed for the first time that Mahmad Mir, who was so generous with his pomegranates, had the most beautiful, clear, green eyes, and that a rather large, dim-witted youth who had recently joined me was the butt of his companions apparently because *his* eyes were bright blue.

Little Khair-ullah, third of the "Mouse" brothers, surprised me by referring to himself as a *mouche*, and giving an uncanny imitation of a mouse twitching its nostrils and pursing up its mouth. He also scored a terrific success with the imaginary sewing of his fingers to his forearm with invisible needle and thread, a party trick not uncommon in European drawing rooms!

On Sunday, our very last at Mundigak, Bakyir was rhythmically beating his shovel on the laden metal bowls flattening the soil in them and producing at the same time a dull, tuneful sound like a pleasantly cracked village church bell, filling me with sudden nostalgia. There was L'Idiot's comical dismay in the evening when he looked for the *charpoy* in the mess, where he liked to doze, and found it had disappeared, already packed away. Thereafter he stood resting his head on the seat of a chair, gazing at us with melancholy, reproachful eyes.

Old Shireen, his eyes moist when I gave him a warm, woollen scarf, turned up in the early morning, waiting outside my cabin door to produce a return gift of three small eggs from beneath his ragged coat; and that was the morning we had discovered a dozen small, completely unused and undamaged vases in the wall a few feet beneath the "shop" in Mound B.

There was an "end-of-term" feeling about the whole camp now. Hassan had already left, gone with Mad Amin on his last trip to Kandahar, to continue from there to Ghazni by bus. Cook seemed to have become madder than usual and given us nothing but rice for three solid days—rice and meat for a first course, rice ring and fruit for the second and even a "porridge" of rice for breakfast!

Finally came the "prizegiving". Ginette and Achour had laid out three groups of *baksheesh*; all the tools that had been damaged this season—lanterns, hand-picks, metal bowls—were displayed on the ledge beneath the mess window. In the front, on an upturned packing case were stood the empty bottles and tins still retaining their lids and caps; the third group consisted of cardboard boxes, tins without lids and similar inferior containers. Each man could choose one article from each group, and what a terribly difficult decision faced the later arrivals. Those who came first had no hesitation in choosing lamps or picks and the larger bottles; runners-up cleared the coffee and cocoa tins and the least damaged of the metal bowls, but there was a great deal of heartburning, hesitation and mind-changing for the end of the queue.

Sirdar for one, a long way down the list, sorted through the metal *tukris*, chose one, returned it, walked away, discovered a hole in the bottom of the second bowl and made another change, dithering in dismay until the man who was next on the list began to protest. Tears of disappointment in his eyes, Sirdar turned to me.

"It is for my mother, *Khanum Sahib*! It is to hold water and flour—but it has a hole. I did not see the hole—it is useless. . .!"

Came the very last day; the struggle to finish washing and sorting and packing the pottery, Jacques' ceremonious shaving of his beard after two years of glorious neglect; this was an operation that attracted the attention of the entire camp, leaving Jacques with a pallid white chin, and looking incredibly young and defenceless.

The cooking pans were thoroughly scoured with sand and put away until next year; the implements were checked against Ginette's inventory; the tent was taken down, the window netting removed and the windows boarded up so that for the last night we slept without ventilation—except for the wind that whistled through the cracks in the doors. Hashim was so full of high spirits at thought of all the *khanums* he was going to meet in Kabul, that he jumped and giggled as though he had been touched by the moon.

There was so much to do that the nostalgia of leaving was softened, but even so the final hours seemed to bind me closer than ever to Mundigak—I could not really believe that this would be my last visit—Insha'Allah, I would return.

There was the last sad walk round the deserted mounds, left abandoned for another year; L'Idiot sat like a monk contemplating the sunset, his graceful ears flowing like silky strands of hair on the breeze that carried the faint sound of the Aroorkh dogs barking. A russet glow in the sky smudged with chips of pastel grey cloud brought the theatrical-looking mountains very close; they were black in the west, pink and palest grey in the east, their serrated edges looking just like the stepped motif on Ebrahim's yellow jar; and then the slender sliver of the old moon lit the turquoise sky with a bright evening star peeping through the inverted bowl.

On the last morning we were up early, packing and loading the truck, sweeping out the huts, rolling the reed mats, tipping the *charpoys* on end and finally padlocking the doors.

A little group that had been the first to greet us on our arrival, Sultan Mahommed, Nasruddin and the "Mouse" brothers, now came to say goodbye, kneeling swiftly at Jean-Marie's feet, clasping his hands between both their own, and kissing them with the old, traditional courtesy. For Ebrahim, Jacques and Achour there was a hug, right cheek to right cheek, left to left; for Ginette and me, the double handclasp.

"*Ba mani Khuda—Khudai hafiz—Khudai pa man—Khudai da malser* . . .", all of which meant "God be with you", or "Go with God".

I looked longingly up at the still-imposing Mound A and the colonnade, now mutilated in the middle. That would certainly be gone if—or rather when, I next came to Mundigak. Perhaps with its disappearance would come the full revelation of the monument's past.

I fervently hoped I would be here to see the next instalment of Mundigak's fascinating history.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

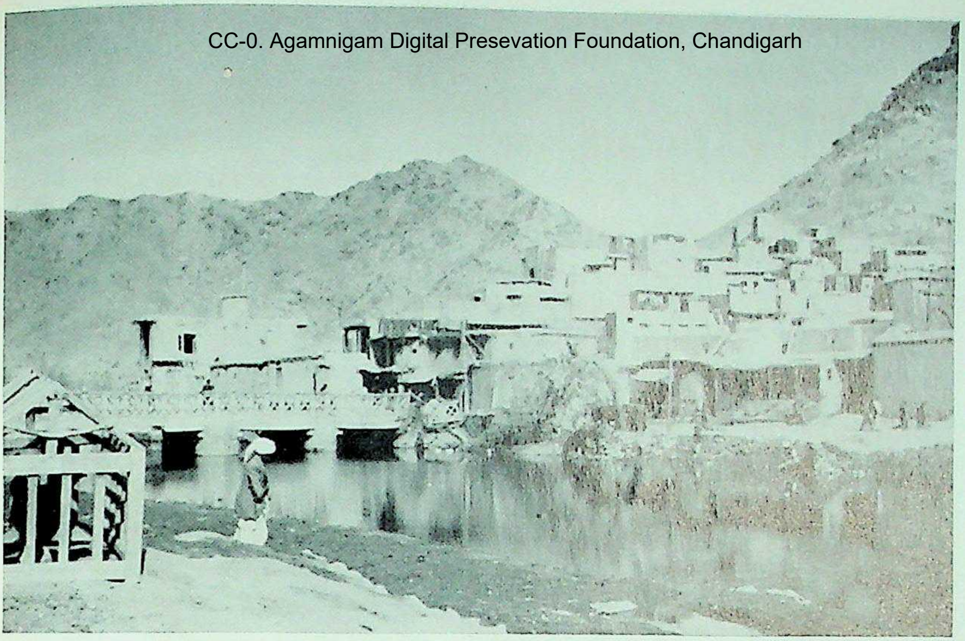
# *Back to Kabul*

THE DUST SWALLOWED my last view of Mundigak and the small figures waving forlornly from the camp.

The road to Kandahar was almost green now even though in Mundigak we had had no rain. On the fringes of the city, prisoners were planting out young cypress and poplar trees along the skirts of the dusty road; as we passed they paused to wave cheerfully.

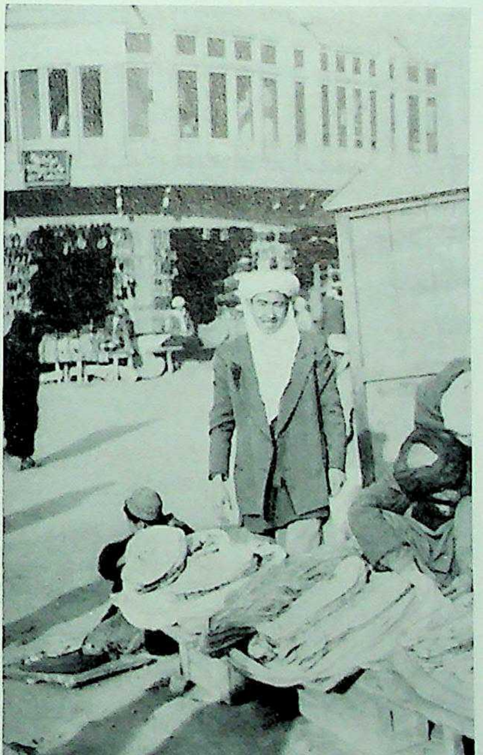
Ginette spent the next morning in the carpet bazaar, sipping green tea with bearded merchants and bargaining happily for rugs. After buying a small Baluch rug myself I wandered off with Achour to watch the craftsmen in a side street fashioning the pale green stone rosaries of Shah Maqsud, small oval beads smooth and cool to the touch, hanging side by side with the sandalwood rosaries suspended from nails hammered into the mud-brick walls. These rosaries were exported all over the Muslim world, even to Mecca. Squatting down, we watched the lean-faced, bearded craftsmen use primitive drills that might have been twin to those we had been digging up at Mundigak, and I felt as though I had been transported back to the land where Noah released his doves as the Flood subsided.

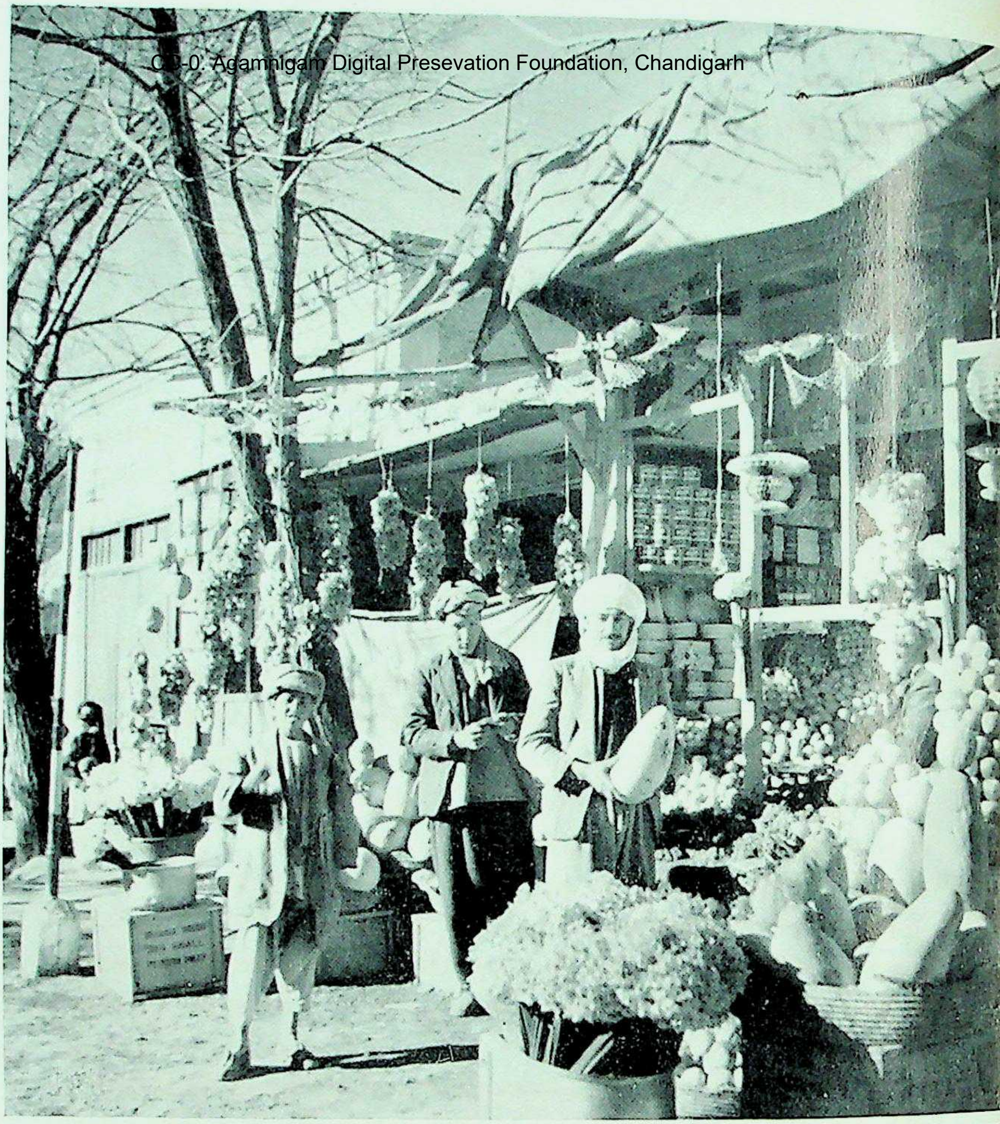
Down the same street, metal workers hammered out copper bowls and near by kerbside cooks grilled skewers of tender *kebabs* over charcoal fires, wafting appetizing aromas the length of the narrow street. A woman shrouded in a white *chadri* balanced on a small donkey that was edging its way through the crowds; to passers-by merry-eyed boys offered grapes ranging from velvet black to palest green, long and oval or fat and round, all the bunches artistically displayed on freshly-picked vine leaves, and kept cool with sprinklings of water from the street well. Polished rosy apples, soft, velvety-pink peaches, spherical golden pumpkins and strings

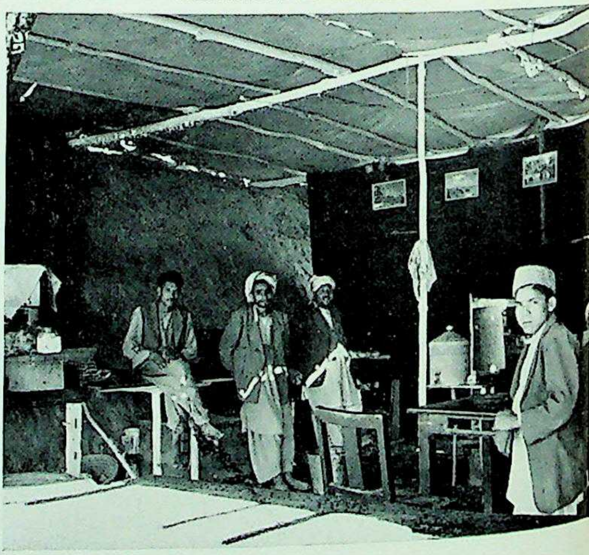


*Above:* Near the Emperor Baber's tomb by the Kabul River and just outside the city these ancient houses crowd up the steep hillside. Nearer to the city's centre the carpet sellers spread out their colourful wares by the river's bank.

*Right:* Unleavened bread called *nan* is made in all shapes and sizes; when freshly baked it tastes delicious. Here, in the centre of the old city of Kabul, a baker offers for sale several kinds of *nan*.







*Above:* Afghanistan's fruit and vegetables are superb and always artistically displayed in the open-fronted shops in Shahr-i-nan, a modern suburb of Kabul.

*Right:* One of the temporary tea-houses (*chaikhana*) put up for the Jaishun Festival, when big crowds flocked into Afghanistan's capital city.

of shiny red pomegranates were in abundance—Kandahar fruit was cheap and delicious. This most important trade centre in Afghanistan exported its rosaries, goatshair, asafoetida, pomegranate rinds and quince seeds to lands far away, and fresh fruits across the border to Pakistan in days of normal peace.

We explored Takinabad, supposedly the site of Alexander the Great's city on the outskirts of modern Kandahar. If ever there had been a Macedonian city here its remains had long ago been cloaked by those of an early Islamic town and that city, which had put up such a heroic resistance to Nadir Shah in 1738, was now no more than a series of decaying, weirdly-shaped mounds of mud-brick scattered with sherds and encircled by eroded sandstone hills. In the valley below, glimpsed through the remnants of the wide mud-brick wall, all the shades of autumn rioted in an explosion of colour—gold and russet and yellow mingled with the soft new green of the sprouting winter crops. In the blue sky above, unfamiliar wisps of cloud speckled the horizon; the faint tinkle of camel bells floated up from a caravan plodding far down in the valley, and on the still air we could hear the creak of a Persian wheel as a group of village women replenished their water pots. Idly I poked my sandal in the dust and uncovered a piece of turquoise-glazed pottery and a square coin covered with green mould. Islamic, not more than a few hundred years old—at most a thousand—much too recent to be interesting to a prehistorian. . . .

When we had obtained all our permits and left Kandahar it was in what I took to be an early morning mist, but turned out to be a dust storm of tremendous proportions. Out of it loomed a camel caravan led by the solemn figure of a tall Kuchhi clad in full evening dress, his embroidered smock hanging outside the black trousers, a tail coat on top and the end of his turban wrapped protectively round his face. Only a little farther on, another Kuchhi emerged from the dust, sporting the dark-green jacket with white leather cuffs of an English Green Line bus driver. Like the overcoat with a large "P.O.W." sign stamped on its back which I had seen on a cobbler in Kabul, these incongruous garments must have come from that special section of the Kabul bazaars devoted to second-hand clothing.

Thirty-five miles from Kandahar we passed the Shah-i-Safar, a tall mound with a well-defined ramp that might well conceal a wide stairway. This was a site Jean-Marie hoped to excavate one day—but Afghanistan is full of tempting archaeological sites and there are not enough people even to start work on them.

It was still cold even at eleven in the morning when we paused for a slice of melon and poked sticks in the layer of ice that covered the roadside stream. Then on, with just a passing wave for Kilat-i-Ghilzai before we were seeing the Tuscan-like countryside, the hills terraced and cultivated, many of them topped with walled villages, which we had missed during our dark ride from Ghazni to Kilat. Here gangs of workmen dressed in a drab chocolate-brown uniform with peaked caps like those of Chinese soldiers were repairing the culverts and bridges ready for winter.

We came into the main street of Shah Jewi, a tiny hamlet where we were going to try to get lunch. There was, in fact, only one street in Shah Jewi. In it the whole population seemed to appear from thin air, watching our every move. We squatted on the mud platform of a *chai khana* waiting for the ever-bubbling samovar to produce tea—it seems to be the one thing that always takes longest to prepare even in a tea-house. Meanwhile we were served with fried eggs on a communal piece of *nan* bread, which demanded a special, concerted technique if we were to avoid breaking the yolks as we tore each at our section of *nan*. Since we were sitting in the street itself, our performance attracted a lot of good-natured amusement and a flattering show of concentrated interest from an elderly gentleman carrying a five-foot staff decorated with cattle horns and coloured streamers.

"He is a *malang*," explained Ebrahim. "*Malangs* renounce the world and the good things of this life—they just live on hashish!"

The *malang* rattled his staff in a desultory manner, obligingly posed for a photograph and accepted a cigarette with an amiable grin. For one who had renounced the good things of life, he didn't seem to be doing too badly. We drove on.

The sun was setting when we stopped for the Afghan members of our party to wash in a wayside stream and say their evening prayers.

Not far away was a particularly well-preserved *caravanserai*, its high, mud walls adorned with geometrical patterns, a shepherd boy and a flock of sheep pausing at the wide gateway. In just such an inn must Mary and Joseph have lodged for the birth of their Son.

It was quite dark when we reached Ghazni; the streets were lit only by the glare from cafés and the gentle flicker of oil lamps in the few stalls still open. We pulled up outside the imposing pink-washed hotel that looked as though there would be at least a dozen rooms inside. There were two only, and one of these already was occupied. The other was crammed with three beds and a large black stove; our bedding and baggage was pushed inside while we trooped off to the café Ginette had discovered on our outward journey.

The blue-painted café was the biggest in the street and boasted glass windows and marble-topped tables with wooden benches and chairs. Like our hotel bedroom, the centre was occupied by an enormous *bokhari* stove dispensing welcome warmth, and we were shown to tables near the stove. Even Hashim was there, he seemed disinclined for amorous adventures until he had eaten—and the cheerful tribesmen already seated, moved to nearby tables to leave room for our party.

The Cafe Bleu was a popular place, crowded with people. Its glass windows were covered with high-coloured landscapes hand-painted by some local artist. Its wooden ceiling was painted bright blue, like the outside woodwork, and a bare electric light bulb cast a glare over the pink-, yellow-, blue- and fawn-striped walls. These walls were almost hidden by the hundreds of framed pictures of tremendous variety and the most lurid hues imaginable. There were pseudo-embroidered pictures of eighteenth-century French shepherds and shepherdesses and playful kittens; Japanese sunsets and lakes with silver tinsel glitter; startling leopards, pyramids and sphinxes so beloved of the Neapolitan tourist touts, a portrait of King Zahir Shah, extracts from the Koran in graceful Kufic characters, and a large coloured advertisement for motor-cycles. On a shelf running just below the ceiling, like an Olde Englyshe Teashoppe, was arranged the best Gardner-(or imitation) ware, bowls and teapots making a colourful splash of blue, rose, green and yellow.

The men—for of course, there were no other women there (what Afghan women do when travelling I never discovered, but probably they are fed round some hidden corner, well out of sight of male eyes), the men here were chatting and smoking and listening to the radio, relaxed as if this was their favourite club, which it probably was. A slender boy squeezed between the closely-packed tables carrying an enormous brass hookah from one client to another. Each would take a few satisfying puffs, then away it went to another customer.

Next morning we sat on our beds crammed between bedding rolls and mattresses eating our breakfast, when the door was pushed open and pink-cheeked, bright-eyed Hassan the bearer edged his way into the jumble. He had spent two weeks' holiday with his wives and today he had got up before dawn to walk from his village some miles away, to join us for the rest of the journey. Shyly he untied a green silk handkerchief and dropped half a dozen new-laid eggs in Ginette's lap.

Jean-Marie now kept his promise to show me old Ghazni. Across the river bed we looked up at the citadel, 150 feet above the level of the plain, but old Ghazni was several miles away. As we drove past the posteen bazaar at the foot of the citadel I remembered that it was here that Alexander the Great had wintered on his way from Kandahar to Balkh, with twenty thousand foot soldiers and three thousand horse.

Had his armies left their mark on the present-day crowds jostling so good-humouredly in the narrow streets? We paused to ask the way to the shrine of Mahmud the Great—there are nearly two hundred shrines in Ghazni—and a straight-nosed young fellow with clear-blue eyes and brown hair escaping from a ragged orange turban, pointed the way. Had his forebears anything in common with the Macedonian? Or that boy with the merry brown eyes and lank dark hair, a grubby sheepskin over one shoulder and a bamboo flute in his hands, could *he* trace his ancestry back to one of Alexander's mercenaries?

Above us on a long, dusty ridge stood Mahmud's famous Towers of Victory, built more than a thousand years after Alexander had camped here. Mahmud of Ghazni, the "Idol Breaker", whose kingdom had spread from the Tigris to the Ganges and whose self-appointed mission was to destroy Hindu temples, capture hundreds of thousands of slaves and sow the seeds of Hindu-Muslim hatred, had been also a patron of the arts and crafts. So I expected a lot of his Towers. Although the mud-brick had been fashioned into intricate geometrical designs, the Towers had been capped with modern copper roofs like coolie hats and I felt a twinge of disappointment. At the back of the Towers crouched the much-renovated, white-washed tomb of Sultan Subaktagin, father of Mahmud.

Down in the valley we could see the local militia marching in the fine dust and rehearsing a resounding set of cheers with great gusto. A mile away from us snuggled the remnants of the old city with its narrow, twisting lanes, tree-shaded, and the residents washing their clothes in the street *djuis* whose water flowed from a stone lion's head, relic of Hindu or Buddhist times—maybe even brought from India by Mahmud? Here a wide doorway in a whitewashed wall led to a cloister-like vaulted corridor opening into a delightful rose garden laid in formal walks and shaded by chenar and fruit trees. Another lion spout opened a dry mouth to the leaf-filled ditches and in the middle of the garden rose a plain white-domed building with yellow-green doors of stout wood and a charming mullah sitting cross-legged in the patch of sunshine at the entrance.

Mahmud had died in A.D. 1030 at the age of sixty-three, after reigning for thirty-three years and his mausoleum was an unpretentious structure; the tomb itself was raised on a marble dais protected by a rail. The mullah invited us in, pulling back the covering of scarlet and gold and rich black velvet to show us the carved marble sarcophagus. He traced the Kufic characters with a slender forefinger. At the back of the shrine a *mihrab* held a number of Korans, each wrapped in a coloured cloth. A devout worshipper was kissing them one by one, and as we walked slowly away a tall, bearded Ghilzai strode past us carrying a sick child in his arms, closely followed by two women in baggy red *purtak* trousers, black shawls round their heads.

The memory of that peaceful shrine, the kindly old guardian, the parents and the sick child, the shady cloisters and tree-lined roads of old Ghazni haunted me like a lovely dream: I hugged it to myself quietly while Jacques searched the bazaar for the black-and-white socks of coarse wool, so like Scandinavian knitting, and Jean-Marie filled up with petrol.

Then we were off again on the road to Kabul.

We didn't stop until we reached Shaikhabad, another one-street hamlet with a row of tea-houses lining one side of the road; on the other side soldierly poplars flanked a green field and beyond was a blue line of jagged mountains. By the side of the tea-house nestling at the foot of a slight slope rippled a clear, delectable stream. Here we all washed our hands of the dust and sweat of the road and then scooped up cupfuls of the clear water, drinking eagerly—after we had seen the welcoming, bustling owner of the *chai khana* fill his kettle from the same point. It seemed churlish for me to comment on the discarded eggshell that came bobbing past as we sat back.

*Nan* bread, a tin of pilchards from Ginette's dwindling stock, green tea and hard-boiled eggs made a feast. I got up to stretch my legs and from curiosity to follow the stream round the back of the *chai khana*. What a mistake! The innocent-looking stream busied itself hugging the walls of the buildings and my sense of smell persuaded me to look up at the curious little protruberances like windowless bays, supported on wooden brackets and suspended at first floor level all along the backs of the buildings. There was no doubt about it; this was a new block and the latest conveniences had been installed. These were privies emptying direct into the stream below. True the stream flowed under them after it passed the front of the *chai khana*, but who knew what happened to it at the top of the slope?

We soon discovered. Not a hundred yards away, round the bend of the road, clustered the old buildings of Shaikhabad, open-fronted *chai khanas* delightfully adorned with blue and green peacocks, flowers and trees painted on their whitewashed walls. The streamlet flowed in front of the cafés. As we passed, a small boy threw a pail of refuse into the water and watched it whirl merrily down the slope. Running water purified itself every thirty feet I believed, or was it yards? But in any case it was too late to start worrying.

We drove into Kabul at dusk and even so we could see the changes since we had left. Russian road-building equipment, painted a conservative blue, stood by the almost completed wide new road to the medical school and the hospital. Old roads from the airport to the centre of the city had been widened or resurfaced and outside the shops in the main streets the sidewalks were being paved.

It was much colder here in Kabul—three thousand feet higher and with an icy wind blowing from the peaks of the Hindu Kush which sparkled like sugar-icing above the city. Even back in Kabul the season's work for Mundigak wasn't over yet. There were photos to be developed and printed and filed. Others from previous seasons to be catalogued and pictures for Ginette's exhibition of French architecture to be mounted and framed. We did this job in a little room lined with shelves encumbered with a variety of archaeological objects; two of the skulls found the previous season, still in plaster and waiting for transport to Europe where they could be scientifically examined; bits and pieces of pottery to be mended; piles of drawing paper, plans and photos; plaited reed baskets filled with earth packed round some specially fragile pot; cardboard boxes of cotton wool and straw for packing; cigar boxes of seals and figurines to be photographed and catalogued before going to Kabul Museum.

We stapled, sawed plywood, cut cardboard and glued titles until hundreds of pictures for the Exhibition had been framed and hung in every room and corridor of the French Club.

When the Exhibition opened the First Secretary of the Russian Embassy accompanied by an interpreter in a grey suit stood listening intently to Ginette's explanatory talk; then he examined a photo of Chartres Cathedral with a puzzled expression—"Please, is it State property or does it belong to a capitalist?" he asked.

Ginette smiled sweetly and gave him the answer gently.

* * * *

I had planned a trip to Afghan Turkestan with the Swiss couple who were taking over the Casals' house but the weeks went by and still we were waiting for transport. Now a further complication arose. Comrades Bulganin and Khrushchev were visiting Kabul as the climax to their grand 1955 tour of Asia, and I received a cable from *The Times* of London asking me to cover this event for them. It was a long time since I had done any reporting as such so I kept my fingers crossed and hoped that the passes north would still be free after the Russian visit.

In the meantime it was getting colder and all I had as an outer garment was an unlined raincoat; so one sunny, crisp morning I walked down to the *posteen* bazaar opposite the Kabul Police Headquarters. On the sunny side of the street the aged public letter writers sat dozing as they waited for customers, their little wooden tables no more than a foot high, their bottles of ink and sheets of blank paper ranged in front of them like a protective barrier. Here and there a customer was slowly dictating a letter or an elderly gentleman with spectacles on the end of his nose read out a message to an intently listening tribesman. I thought of the letter-writers in the Karachi bazaars where among the scribes there are a number of enterprising young men seated in their kerbside stalls before typewriters of many and curious makes, ready to produce efficient business letters for their illiterate clients.

Across the road the *posteen* shops were later in opening for business. Only when the sun reached their shutters would the wooden doors be drawn back and the openings to the little cubby holes hung with red and yellow fur-lined jackets, magnificent ocelot, karakuli and fox skins tossed carelessly on the floor, with fur-lined slippers and high fur caps. I haggled and bargained in three shops, bringing the price of a fox fur lining down from twelve hundred Afghanis to eight hundred—no doubt I would have got it for half that in the old city, but time was short. Four days later my lining was ready, with press studs to fasten it to the raincoat and a striped flannel backing that showed two inches below the hem of my coat. I looked like a young elephant when I got it on—but I was warm, and that was all I cared about.

With guides from various Embassies and the United Nations Organization, as well as kind-hearted Afghans, I went sight-seeing to the King's summer villa set amid gardens of cherry and almond trees on the fir-clad slopes of the Paghman Range, twenty miles north and two thousand feet higher than Kabul. Here ex-King Amanullah had planned his summer capital with public gardens and a bandstand, a garden café, cinema and even a copy of the "Arc de Triomphe". King Zahir's villa was a dream of a house built round a tiled patio in a pleasing combination of Florentine and North African styles. It had a magnificent swimming pool, a log cabin set on the edge of a woodland lake, vineyards, rose gardens and delicate marble balustrades.

Higher still I ski-ed in competition with a wolf and a string of shaggy Bactrian camels laden with firewood and plodding miserably through the snow. Probably this was the first and last time I shall ever ski at over eleven thousand feet.

In Kabul itself there were the fascinating spice markets to explore, the silver and cloth bazaars and the carpet *serais*. These with their wooden galleried *serais* built round big courtyards and tucked away behind the main streets fascinated me most of all. It was like walking into a medieval inn. The ground floor was occupied by shops where the merchants squatted with their wares. The two upper stories provided storage and lodgings for the dealers and the open space in the middle was a mêlée of laden trucks and camels with piles of rugs scattered in the mud for anyone to walk, ride or drive over. Tadjiks, Turkomans and their slant-eyed brethren from Mongolia, wearing round fur caps, short, quilted floral tunics, loose breeches and high black boots—surely descendants of Genghis Khan's hordes!—called out the glories of their purple-black rugs of Herat, soft orange Bokharas, saddlebags from Turkestan, red Maimanas, red, black and white Turkmenian carpet bags and silky deep red and black prayer rugs from Daulatabad.

"Come and see, *Khanum*!" beckoned the traders as they warmed themselves under quilts spread over charcoal braziers. "Come and see a fine Bokhara—a prayer rug for you, *Khanum*?"

Someone would offer a cup of tea brewed on a brazier in the courtyard and friendly smiles and twinkling eyes beckoned from every doorway.

In the cloth market merchants sat among a riot of coloured silks and patterned cottons from Russia, gold and silver tassels—and oddly enough, coffers of currency, for here they changed anything from rials to Australian shillings, from escudos to rupees.

I lost myself in Mohammed Din's antique shop overlooking the Chaman; far too expensive for my pocket but full of treasures, like an Aladdin's cave. And then I discovered the local tea shops.

The "Zenith", near the main bridge, with its marble-topped tables and picture-hung walls, was one of the most popular restaurants and here I often encountered Government officials snatching a quick meal—tender *kebabs* and fine Kabuli *pilao* was the Zenith's speciality, plus a small boy who crouched by the window and wound up the gramophone to ensure a constant ear-splitting background noise. At the other end of the street was the "Afghan" *chai khana* where with Achour and a South African sculptor I sipped green tea and picked at saucers of coloured sweets. We sat in the front row facing the window, and the place was packed with a solid mass of men who looked as though they had settled down for the night. Facing us, actually sitting in the window, were four musicians, two playing a type of *sarenda*, a many-stringed fiddle, one man beating on a pair of *tabla* drums and the fourth working vigorously at a harmonium worked with one hand pumping the back. They played for half an hour without a sign of slackening, the two *sarenda* players taking it in turns to sing. One of them was a black-bearded, twinkle-eyed fellow who sang with great abandon and gusto. As one tune was finished, another player would start a fresh one; the others soon picked it up and joined in. One of the musicians recognized Achour, whom he had met in the north, and while we were plying them with tea in the interval, we learned that the men played at a local theatre.

As they talked, I looked at the mass of pictures that covered the walls, including an enormous original oil painting depicting the sack of Kabul in horrible gory realism—which sack I never discovered, but it looked like Genghis Khan's. The gem of all in this alleged anti-British capital was in the corner by the musicians, right in the window, where Indian film stars and extracts from the Koran surrounded a large colour reproduction of Britain's Queen Elizabeth the Second, wearing the uniform of Colonel-in-Chief of the

Grenadier Guards and on horseback at the ceremony of Trooping the Colour!

Next evening we went to the theatre to try to see our musicians—it seemed we chose the wrong theatre for there was no orchestra in this rambling building. All the parts in the variety show we saw were played by men or boys in true Elizabethan fashion. Stalwart young men with rosy cheeks and clumping boots beneath their long robes minced across the stage and made love to husky leading men in European suits. And of course, with the exception of myself, the audience was male too.

A farewell party for the Casals was given in an old house approached through a tangle of narrow twisting lanes in the old city. Romantic candlelight flickered softly across a room furnished with low divans covered with striped rugs, a painted banner depicting Tsar Nicholas and Napoleon and family portraits.

A bevy of pretty girls, Italian in looks and dress, crowded together in one corner while well-dressed, self-possessed young men welcomed us into the family in exquisite French, Italian and English. Soon we were all sitting on the floor, singing, helping ourselves from the generously-laden buffet and chatting as though we were old friends—and I had been told that upper-class Afghans were stand-offish! If they were, it must be from fear of political repercussions, not lack of human warmth.

Next morning I went out to the airfield with Jean-Marie, Ginette and Jacques, to see them catch the last commercial flight before winter snows cut the air link till spring. There was an icy wind from the Pamirs as I waved farewell to the gay, warm-hearted couple who had welcomed me to Afghanistan on a broiling summer's day five months previously.

When the plane had disappeared through a gap in the mountains, I turned back to spend Christmas in Kabul.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# *Afghan Holiday*

A RUGGEDLY ROMANTIC fringe of towering mountains surrounds Kabul city which is edged with ancient walls, crenellated battlements and square watchtowers brooding over the cramped buildings below. Today, the fabulous wall creeping up the mountainsides and down again into the valleys can no longer wrap itself around all Kabul. The city has burst its seams and stretches ever farther away from its outworn girdle of stones, rocks and mud-brick.

It seemed now as though tribesmen from the most remote corners of the country were crowding through the narrow "Tiger Gate" to the city streets, and in particular the high-cheeked, narrow-eyed men from Afghan Turkestan who were to entertain Marshal Bulganin and Mr. Krushchev with the national game of *Buzkashi*.

So many strangers in Kabul, such an air of festivity with flags and banners decorating the streets, brought back vivid memories of the earlier *Jaishun* we had seen before leaving for Mundigak, when Afghanistan celebrated the recognition of her independence and her ruler's change of title from the ancient "Amir" to the more modern "King".

The crowds had adored every minute of the parade; the troops of soldiers marching by in squeaky new boots and brand-new uniforms; the tiny boy cadets striving desperately to keep pace with the longer-legged elders in their smart uniforms modelled on those of St. Cyr; the guards wearing the German helmets of the First World War pattern which gave them an oddly sinister appearance; the twenty-four planes of the Royal Afghan Air Force flying overhead in formation, and finally to tremendous applause, troops had drawn along a cannon whose wheels were entwined with flowers. At this point an officer standing by me had giggled apologetically. "I am sorry," he had said, "but those are the cannon we captured from the British in our last war when we won our independence. I am sorry for you, but it is true!"

That had been the first day of *Jaishun* and at the time in the new suburb where the Casals lived, the electric power had been steadily growing weaker till the lights were just a tiny orange glow. As we approached the parade ground and the exhibition buildings the reason seemed plain. All the current had been diverted to make the night splendid here at the fair. The hills behind the Chaman and the tomb of King Nadir Shah were outlined in electric lights. The delicate dome of the tomb seemed to hang like magic in the dark sky. A flashing sign in Arabic characters spelt out a message none of us could read, and the long processional road was garlanded with twinkling coloured bulbs. The ground itself was dotted with pavilions outlined in coloured lights and from an open space in the centre came the muffled, dramatic sound of beating drums and wistful flutes accompanying a troupe of dancers.

As the moon rose it revealed an artificial silvery lake created for the occasion in two days and now edged with enormous *shamianas* (open-sided tented pavilions), furnished with carpets, easy chairs, settees and small tables. Each pavilion represented a different Government Department and was used for the entertainment of distinguished official guests. Here and there under a clump of trees a little group of men would sing and play to themselves, gloriously oblivious of their audience. An eager crowd thronged the entrance to an open-air theatre before which I lingered hopefully but we had been led through the multitude to the brilliantly-lit stadium and exhibition buildings as, with a glint in his eye, the United Nations South African Karakul expert had made straight for a series of out-buildings.

"My sheep," he had announced proudly, and there in all the glory of freshly-shampooed pelts, half a dozen curly-haired Karakulis stood contentedly munching at their troughs, watched over by two equally proud and well-scrubbed young Afghans.

An Arab geographer—was it Ibn Batuta?—called the Karakul sheep the "Black Roses of Bokhara". They are in fact an ancient

Persian breed and the lambs are killed at two or three days, before the tightly-curled ringlets have opened. They are not, as has often been stated, removed from their dams before birth. These tiny, silky skins are the famous Karakuli or Persian lamb skins whose export forms one of Afghanistan's biggest, if not the biggest, trade abroad—with fruit and nuts they make up eighty to eighty-five per cent of exports. Cotton, woollen *posteens*, hides, skins, carpets, timber and medicinal plants and drugs make up the rest.

Our Chinese companion, Dr. Kay, had been getting impatient to show us his contribution to Afghanistan's plan for prosperity and he took over the role of guide until we found a stand with the tiny leaves of the Afghan mulberry trees entwined round one pillar, and enormous Chinese leaves round another. Samples of the coarse Afghan silk lay side by side with the fine Chinese product and Afghan country folk gaped in astonishment at the difference, listening eagerly to the explanations given by a beaming young Afghan student, while Mrs. Kay, her kindly eyes shining with enthusiasm, had demonstrated the simple Japanese loom she was trying to introduce to Afghan cottage industry.

Cotton, forestry, agriculture, gemmology, carpentry—United Nations experts in all these fields demonstrated old traditional methods or new ones easily adaptable to Afghan conditions. I was anxious to see the handicrafts. One large section had been devoted to products from Pushtoonistan which, according to the map on the wall, included the whole of Baluchistan, Waziristan and Peshawar! Then among the fur-lined slippers from Quetta and the embroidered *posteens* from Ghazni, I spotted the hat. An enchanting circle of *café-au-lait* fox with a crown of softest silver-grey Karakul and lined with white lambswool, it was the only one of its kind in the exhibition.

"Yes, it is good," pronounced the Karakul expert. "This is what the men in the north wear, the Uzbekis and the Tadjiks."

Some of the goods had been for sale and among them the hat, for one hundred Afghanis: about two pounds ten. I was still thinking of it longingly when I was moved on to inspect the furniture exhibition and I had continued to dream of the hat all that night and all next day. Next evening I had returned and the hat was still there and I bought it quickly, to find back in Europe a few years later, Paris decreed large fur hats the latest fashion gimmick!

It was only when looking at the exhibits most difficult for any woman to resist, that I realized that nowhere in the entire exhibition, had I caught a glimpse of a woman, even in her concealing *chadri.*

"But can't women join in the Jaishun celebrations then?" I asked an Afghan official.

"Of course they can—but not with the men. You see, they have their own *Jaishun*, it is held in a school and I will arrange for you to go there tomorrow," he had promised.

Accordingly the next afternoon a car with two hooded figures called for me at the Casals' house. It proved to be one of the very first taxis to arrive in Afghanistan. Like the splendid new buses, it was of Russian make and had appeared on the streets only that week. To hire one you had to telephone the police.

The black hood and the pale blue hood were raised slightly to greet me and I glimpsed two pale, delicately beautiful faces beneath.

"We poor ladies have to suffer beneath these *chadris,*" sighed one as she lowered her veil and ordered the driver to move off.

As we approached the school streams of women in their *chadris* converged on the building. The road was lined with *gharries* and cars and burly servants escorting their veiled ladies through the narrow door in the high mud wall.

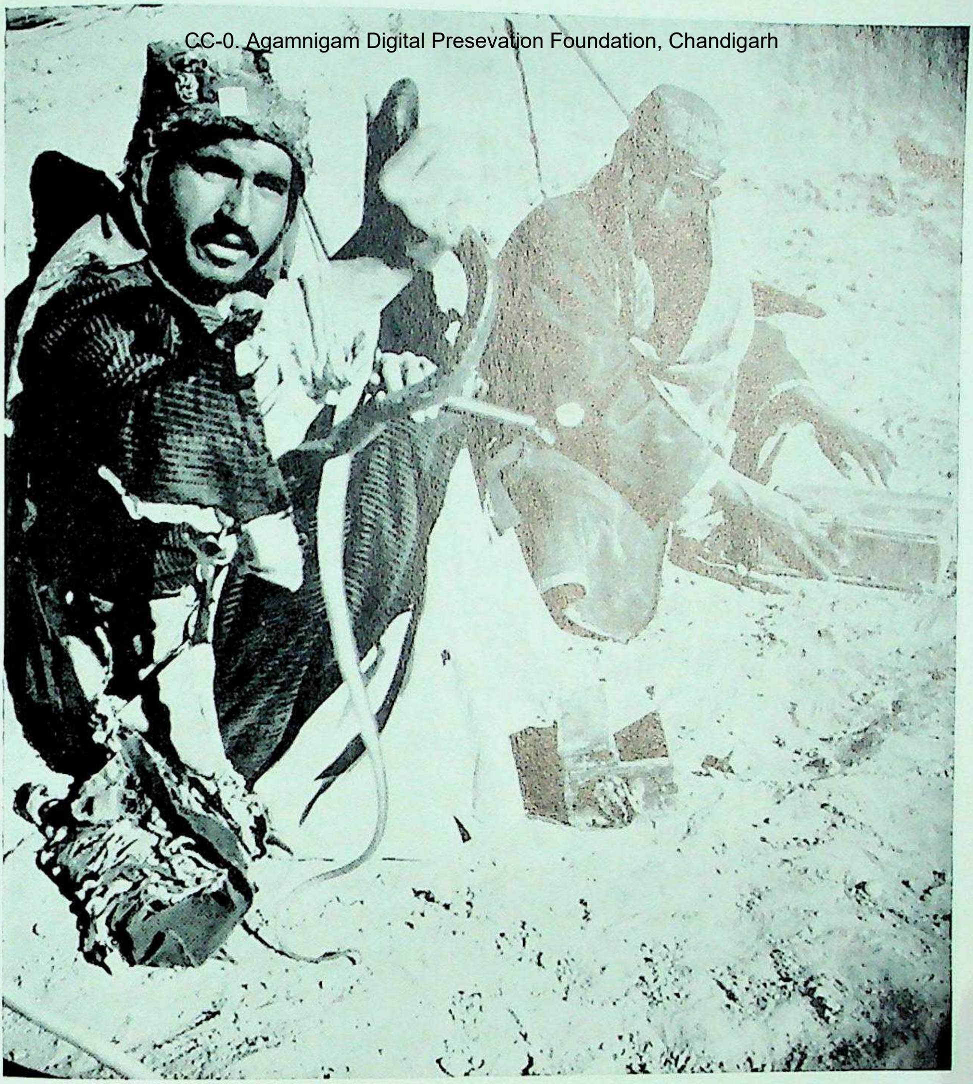
Once inside, off came the veils and to my disappointment instead of national dress they had revealed slender, stockinged legs in high-heeled shoes, well-cut black suits and gloved hands holding chic handbags.

All the women of Kabul seemed to be here, some with their face veils thrown back, still wearing their *chadris* like a cloak over their shoulders as they strolled beneath the trees. There were elderly women in the traditional long dress of black, heavily embroidered with silver ornaments and coins, silver ornaments in their hair, and beneath the dresses, ankle-length baggy *purtak* trousers of red satin or cotton. There were schoolgirls in modern European uniforms, Hazara women with narrow eyes and high cheekbones, ruddy complexions and floral printed tunics over white trousers; small children with embroidered mirrorwork caps and amulets tied to their hair; teenagers in ballerina skirts or tight, tapered jeans, their black hair in an "urchin cut"; dusty, ragged Kuchhi women nursed flaxen-haired, blue-eyed babies—"from the times of Alexander the Great, you see," explained one of my companions.

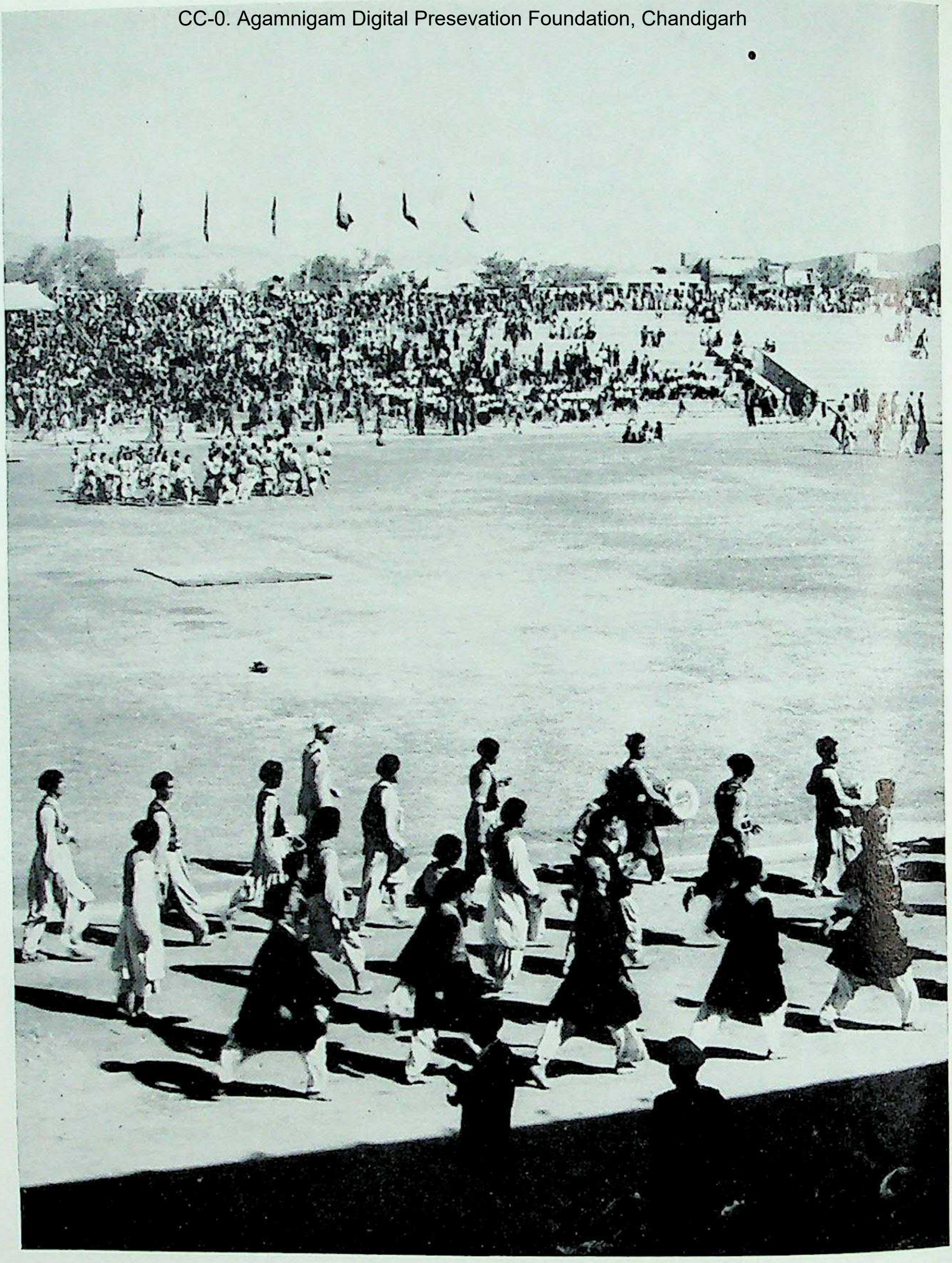
To wind up the whole of the *Jaishun* celebrations there had been Pushtoonistan Day demonstrations. The Afghanistan Government maintains that areas of Western Pakistan occupied predominantly by Pushtu-speaking tribes, should be allowed to decide whether they should form an independent sovereign state to be called Pushtoonistan or Paktoonistan, although it has not been quite clear whether this right would also apply to the three and a half million Pathans—or Pushtu speakers—in Afghanistan itself. And whether in fact the Pathans could form an independent, economic unit is another matter that needs clarifying. The question was full of complexities and both the Afghan and the Pakistan Governments had issued many booklets and pamphlets on the subject and a great deal of press and radio propaganda. It had been the cause of the attack on the Pakistan Embassy and Legations in Afghanistan, of a constant unrest on the frontiers and of the final closing of the Pakistan frontier at Chaman and all the tense atmosphere that had led to the rumours of war. It was not a subject in which a foreigner could judiciously become involved, but since altitude sickness had prevented me from seeing the tribal dancing in the earlier days of the *Jaishun*, I was determined not to miss the performance promised by the Pushtoonistan Day celebrations and I had accepted an invitation to accompany two young Afghans to the sports stadium.

The gay flags of Afghanistan and Pushtoonistan fluttered from the poles around the stadium, and behind them, the craggy peaks of the Hindu Kush formed a dramatic back-drop.

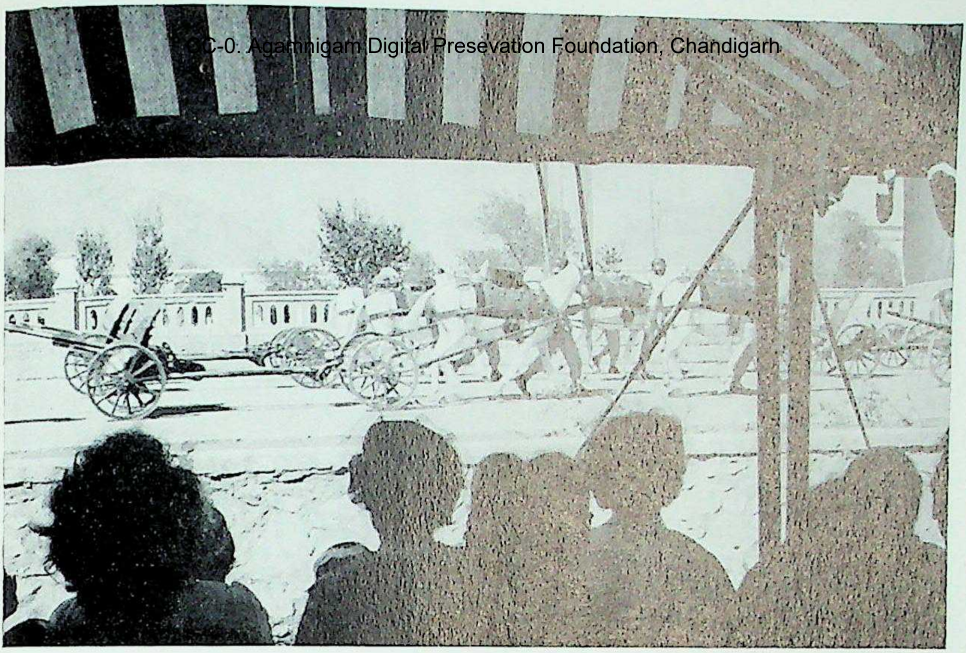
Small groups of tribesmen surged in and out of the arena, waving their flags. There were impassioned speeches and from the shadowy depths of a pavilion opposite me someone had recited a long poem amplified in a booming voice of doom. We watched troupes of dancers from all parts of tribal territory, some in full-skirted black shirts and baggy black trousers, scarlet sashes round their waists;



Two Margirs visited us at Mundigak. These men are snake-charmers who wander around Afghanistan giving displays of their art and ridding village homes of poisonous snakes. Their colourful, patched headgear is decorated with charms. (See page 141.)



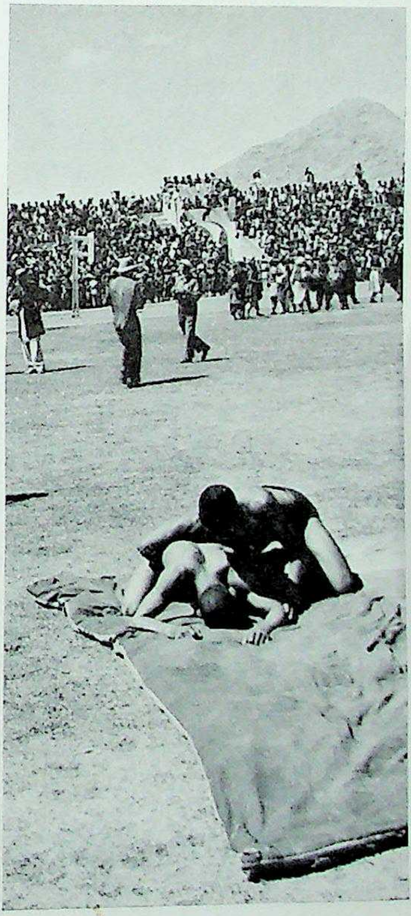
From all parts of Afghanistan tribesmen gathered in Kabul for the Jaishun Festival, held to celebrate Afghanistan's independence, and of which a feature is Pukhtoonistan Day. The photograph shows one group dancing round the sports stadium before joining with others to perform traditional warrior dances in the arena. (See page 176.)

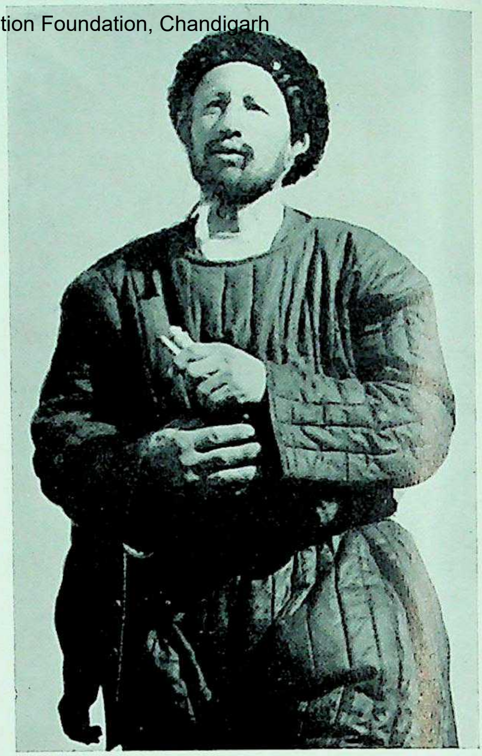


On this page are more photographs from the Jaishun Festival. *Above:* Guns captured from the British in 1842 are paraded.

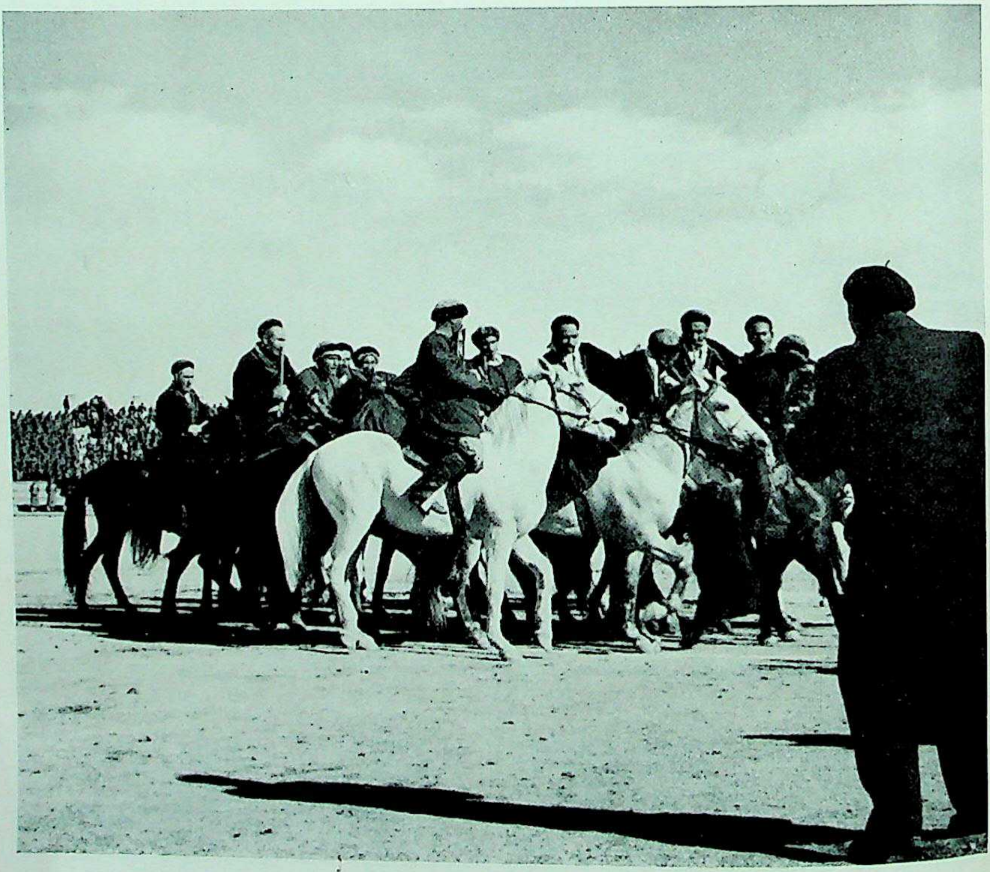
*Below:* Dholak drummers continue to give a fast and accurate beat even while dancing and twisting over on the ground.

*Right:* A display by Palaiwan wrestlers.





The roughest game in the world—*Buzkashi* (which means literally "dragging the goat")—is attributed to Genghis Khan. The object is for a horseman to seize the headless corpse of a goat lying in a circle and to carry it round fixed points to score. The riders carry—and use—whips; their mounts are trained to strike with their hooves at the goat—and the man carrying it. Formerly teams of hundreds a side took part. Now numbers are limited and the game is permitted only on State occasions. The quilted coat worn by the horseman (*right*) is necessary protection from blows by hoof and whip. Players in this instance are Uzbeks and Kirkhiz tribesmen. (See page 181.)



some in white trousers and coloured shirts whose full skirts billowed like blossoming parachutes as the men spun faster and faster. Most of the dancers were Waziris or Pathans with black hair bobbed and parted in the middle, flying madly as they spun like tops. Some tribesmen, however, had shaved their skulls completely but all of them blazed with energy under the hot sun.

They had formed into circles to dance the *Attan*, Afghanistan's national dance, accompanied by the stirring beat of the *dhol*, heavy, double-headed drums which were the traditional accompaniment to the *Attan*. The drums were suspended from the players' necks and were beaten with bare hands or with short sticks. Other musicians played high-pitched flutes called *toula* or *surna*, walking round inside the circles of dancing men, each circle with its own drummer and flautist.

As the drumbeats quickened the men whirled and leapt into the air, uttering terrifying shrieks and waving their red sashes. Across their chests the belts of cartridges glinted in the sun. The drum beats quickened and changed to a fast war rhythm. The men crouched and danced like Cossacks, they rolled on the ground, twisting in time to the drums; and the drummers themselves leapt and performed slow somersaults while continuing to beat an unbroken rhythm. The bobbed-haired Pathans were the most energetic of all, tossing and rolling their heads until their black hair stood up on end so that they resembled golliwogs and their faces were those of men in a trance.

While the dancers hypnotized themselves into the final stages of frenzy, the space between the various groups had been occupied by pairs of wrestlers, each man striving to pin the other's shoulders to the ground; other couples fought each other with long sticks and small wicker shields each the size of a dinner plate. Every now and then small groups of over-enthusiastic bystanders carried away with the spectacle left their seats to join in the fun, some drawing their own swords and round, brass-studded shields to fence with enthusiasm until the police ordered them back to their seats.

* * * *

One crisp afternoon shortly before the Soviet visit, the old-fashioned bell at the Casals' house jangled imperatively. The summons came from my tireless Afghan guide, waiting with a *tonga* drawn by a high-stepping horse, looking very fetching in its gay scarlet scarf trimmed with blue bobbles, tied like a pretty girl's head-scarf. "You have not yet seen the Co-operative—I shall take you there this afternoon," announced my escort, tilting his Karakuli hat at a rakish angle.

The Co-operative was housed in a large building overlooking the wide Chaman-i-Huzuri parade ground, not far from Mohammed Din's antique shop. We climbed the stone staircase to the office of the Co-operative's manager, a quiet young man in an immaculately cut European suit. Despite all his European exterior and his up-to-date store, I was delighted to see that he observed the traditional hospitality of the Afghan shopkeeper. Before anything else we must have tea. A small boy with an outsize in smiles pushed his way through the bead curtain bearing a tea tray, and over a cup of the national drink—the average Afghan drinks at least a dozen cups a day—I learnt that the Co-operative was one of several such stores intended for the use of Service personnel and civil servants.

I turned the empty cup upside down and followed the manager to the tailoring department where a master-cutter and his assistants were making up material that could be purchased in the shop below, lengths of suiting from Russia, Italy, Germany and England. Across the corridor was a cafeteria with the only European-style bar—tea and soft drinks only, of course—that I had seen in all Afghanistan, complete with high stools covered in shiny Rexine. Unlike any European bar, however, this one had a small adjoining room which had been converted into a *masjid* where customers could worship.

Over the counter of the tea-bar I noticed a shelf on which stood one lone box of throat pastilles, something for which I had scoured the bazaars and chemists of Kabul in vain. At my exclamation of delight, my companion, who was entitled to shop at the Co-operative, offered to buy me the box. Regretfully the barman shook his head. He could sell me just one pastille, "but see, there are only a few left and those I must save for others," he explained.

Downstairs the general shopping centre had all the appearance of one of the London stores during the January sales. Men in turbans or Karakuli hats or khaki uniform caps, with their womenfolk in *chadris* of all colours, were struggling in the crowd to reach the counters where rubber galoshes and wellington boots were on sale. A new consignment had just arrived from Russia and the mixture of rain and snow that we had been having during the past few days had turned Kabul streets into muddy tracks in which only high, rubber boots offered any protection.

Bolts of gay Russian prints and cottons, Russian watches, razor blades, shoes, soap and perfume were all displayed behind the glass counters and with generous determination my companion insisted on buying me a present—a large bottle of "Red Moscow" scent and a tablet of Russian soap marketed under the enticing name of "Carmen". The gay wrapper depicted a Senorita with a rose between her lips, but the red soap inside the wrapper smelt and looked remarkably like "Lifebuoy".

"But you must try the perfume—'Red Moscow' is good," urged my friend, opening the glass stopper of the Kremlin-shaped bottle, and before I could steady his hand he had poured a generous portion of the contents over my person. In the East, men and women alike are fond of strong perfume and see no reason to be mean about its use, so a week later I was still travelling in a cloud of "Red Moscow" when I arrived on the snowy airfield to wait for the arrival of Marshal Bulganin and Mr. Kruschev on the last lap of their official tour of Asian countries.

For weeks now the city had been having its face lifted for the big event and as one Afghan official told me, "It is good to have important visitors. When Senator Nixon came to us the airport road was widened; when Colonel Nasser came it was resurfaced; now that the Russians are coming, it has been rebuilt! So you see, Kabul gains something with every visit!"

Meanwhile, workmen continued to lay the paving stones in the main thoroughfares; the blue Russian steamrollers continued to work on the new roads; the fat-tailed sheep rustled through the golden leaves that lay thickly under the poplar trees and the plump doves preened themselves on the pylons and triumphal arches erected across the processional route, with banners that read, in Persian and Russian, "Afghanistan and U.S.S.R. are Close Neighbours," and "Our doors are always open to our Friends".

Gay flags in the Afghan national colours of red, green and black, fluttered along the route, while clusters of Afghan and Soviet flags together were arranged on the walls of buildings lining the roads. According to bazaar reports some four thousand banners and flags had been flown specially from Moscow for the street decorations.

Everyone was assembled on the airfield, the Corps of Diplomats with the Cabinet in one open-fronted *shamiana*, the Russian community in another—a large number of men all dressed alike in dark overcoats with padded shoulders and cloth caps or black trilbies, and plump shapeless women wearing clothes that were vaguely reminiscent of the thirties or early nineteen-forties in style, all with the same kind of shapeless felt hat in dull mud colours, pulled over one ear. A few, by contrast, wore coats of Persian lamb slung carelessly round their shoulders.

A guard of honour of exceptionally tall Afghans, impressive in their old-style German helmets and ankle-length greatcoats, was drawn up on the field, together with a military band.

An enormous Russian newsreel camera man looking deliciously 1920-ish in his peaked cap worn back to front, filmed the planes as they arrived—Mr. Gromyko in the first, followed by the smiling Marshal Bulganin with his neat little white beard and the air of a benevolent Father Christmas, belied by a pair of steely, shrewd, blue eyes. He gave my Uzbeki fur hat a particularly penetrating look—or was it the waft of "Red Moscow" that had made him feel at home?—before stepping into the long black limousine with its thick bullet- and bomb-proof doors and windows. Then came Mr. Kruschev, his earthy, heavy features looking as though they had been soft putty pushed together by a displeased sculptor.

Before the Russians left Kabul, we were to enjoy a rare spectacle, the ancient game of *Buzkashi*, so rough that it has been completely banned in Russia and until about 1953 was banned in Afghanistan too—or at least, in Kabul. At one time it was very popular in

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and probably is still played in secluded parts of the country.

The name *Buzkashi* literally means "Dragging the goat" and Genghis Khan was supposed to have introduced it to Afghanistan. At one time it had been played from East Turkestan to Persia. Today it is probably confined to Turkestan although I did hear of a game played near Kandahar in 1954. It is normally played by two teams, each consisting of anything from sixty to a hundred horsemen. December was not at all the right time for the game as the ground was iron-hard and both horses and men had had to travel over high, snow-bound passes dividing Kabul from Afghan Turkestan. The special performance staged for the Russians was held in the sports stadium with reduced teams each of thirty or forty riders.

It was a superb day. The sky had cleared and the sun shone from a blue void. The packed stadium surrounded by hundreds of would-be spectators who were too late to get into the arena was decorated with the mingled flags of the Soviet Union and Afghanistan fluttering against the dramatic background of the snow-capped Hindu Kush. The sparkling, rarified air was truly like wine; no wonder there was no need of alcoholic stimulants in such a heavenly climate! I had already forgotten the slush and biting winds of the past few days.

While a Russian plane circled overhead—we learnt later that it was a brand-new IL.14 which the Soviets just left on the airfield as they departed, not even bothering to mention this gift—troops of tribesmen circled and danced an introduction to the entertainment.

At last the dancers were persuaded off the field and the two *Buzkashi* teams rode in front from opposite entrances. One team was from Kataghan, the other from the next-door province of Mazar-i-Sharif. The magnificently muscular men with their narrow, slanting eyes, high cheekbones, round fur caps (just like mine, I noticed with satisfaction!), might have been the very backbone of Genghis Khan's own armies. One team wore blue quilted tunics, the other red tunics, and both wore dark-blue breeches and high, soft leather boots, and carried heavy stock-whips tipped with steel. Their mounts matched the superb quality of the riders, heavy-shouldered, big-necked Turkomans obviously with Arab blood in their veins. I learnt that they were specially trained for *Buzkashi* and usually about five or six years old.

"Last year the horse of the leader of the winning team was valued at two Chevrolets," said my companion, "but the owner would not part with his horse. And this year at Begrami a horse fell dead in the game after bursting a blood vessel. That horse was not a champion, but it was worth eight hundred of your pounds; it was just an ordinary horse but the owner stood on the field and he cried and cried and then knelt down to pray. It was all very sad. . . ."

The proper way to play *Buzkashi* is in a wide open space with the teams at the top of a steep incline and a beheaded goat lying in a hollow at the foot; the goat, or sometimes it is a young calf, usually weighs about sixty pounds; when a calf is used it can weigh up to a hundred and twenty pounds, no small weight for a man to pick up from the saddle at the gallop! At a given signal the teams tear down the slope and two or three leaders in each team, called *chapandaz*, aim for the goat, one of them lifting it from the ground while the other two together with the rest of their team ride close to block off their rivals, circling in protection. According to one informant the riders must always keep both feet in the stirrups, but another told me that they are allowed to cling to the horse with one arm and leg over the horse's back as they bend down to pick up the goat.

As soon as the horse feels the weight of the carcass it breaks away from the mêlée and makes for four fixed points in the field that must be circled before the goat is dropped back into the centre of the marked ring. A successful round scores a point but of course the opposing team is struggling to wrest the goat away. The horses are trained to rear up on their hind legs and land with their front hooves on the goat that is being held by the *chapandaz*. It is just too bad if the rider's head happens to be in the way! Riders lash out with their steel-tipped whips and some, I was told, carry knives to cut the girths on their opponents' mounts. No wonder the game had been banned because of the numerous fatalities at each performance!

The version that we saw in the stadium was a much milder affair than any held in the freedom of the steppe, but even so, once the game started with the teams tearing hell for leather down the field there was no quarter asked or given, for players or spectators.

Clinging to my two still cameras and my ciné I dodged in and out of the arena; every now and then the horses would get into a scrum and rear up so high that one fell over backwards on its rider; then the scrum would break and away would gallop the momentarily victorious rider with the two teams thundering after him, clods of frozen earth flying in all directions, the horses excitedly neighing and the wicked hiss of the whips cutting the air. Circling the teams on another magnificent mare from the King's own stables, a gift from King Feisal of Irak, was the umpire, Sardar Farouk, a little incongruous in a heavy navy blazer with an Olympic badge and a stiff-peaked jockey cap.

Each team had a non-playing captain who decided the strength of his side and what was to count as a foul. As in a medieval tournament however, the captains could, and often did, ignore the referee and appeal direct to the King, himself a devotee of the game.

On this occasion, after several games, it was decided that the Kateghan team had won and the plump little captain together with a tall, broad shouldered rider, the leading *chapandaz* of the winning team, stepped forward to be presented with an enormous silver cup, far too civilized an award, one felt, for such an uncivilized game!

The origin of *Buzkashi* is said to have been the Central Asian custom of putting a girl of marriageable age on the best horse of the village, with a goat slung across her saddle. Whoever managed to catch her won her for his bride. I wondered whether the game I had heard of, played in Wales, where riders carry heavy weights on horseback, had any connexion with *Buzkashi*? What did seem strange was the fact that among the Hazaras of central Afghanistan who are after all, Mongol in origin, *Buzkashi* is completely unknown.

Leaving the stadium we passed between rows of sweating horses and men, some of them, in spite of the comparative gentleness of today's game, displaying nasty-looking wounds; yet neither men nor horses seemed to take the slightest notice of their "scratches".

Would Marshal Bulganin reintroduce *Buzkashi* to the U.S.S.R. I wondered, as I watched him leave the stadium, or was it still "too rough" for the kind-hearted Russians?

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# *Welcome Back*

THE LAST DAYS of September, 1957, saw me back again in Mundigak.

"*Sterai Mashai, Zinda Bashi, Khub ast, Khanum Sahib? Pakeriye, Sala Matiye?*"

Sirdar rushed up, husky voiced, floppy turban falling over his eyes, hands outstretched in greeting. Behind him ran Mashuk, a wide smile splitting his good-natured features, a fringe of untidy black hair framing his face. Wherever I turned, welcoming voices and hands greeted me and my tongue stumbled clumsily over the half-forgotten phrases of Persian and Pushtu.

The bare desert, the ragged fringe of mountains, the cluster of mud huts at the foot of the great, half-eaten mound—save for the ravages of archaeological picks and shovels, the setting and the characters were unchanged since my first stay here two years before. But *I* had changed, for when I had first come to Mundigak in that September of 1955, the desert had seemed inhospitably primitive and bare. My eyes, accustomed to the sight of England's soft greenery, had found Mundigak's dust and brilliant sunshine almost unbearable. In the eighteen months since leaving Afghanistan my life had changed. On my way back from Afghanistan I had met and, shortly afterwards, married a petroleum engineer who was in charge of Asia's largest natural-gas field, and I had been living in Bugti tribal territory, Baluchistan, physically an even more inhospitable country than Mundigak.

Although I had travelled in various parts of Baluchistan, Bugti territory was new to me and for the past six months I had been living through the heat of a summer in one of the world's hottest deserts where shade temperatures reached 130 degrees F. and there were only two or three settled communities with nearby water and scanty greenery in the whole territory.

So now, when I came to see Mundigak once more, the climate seemed comparatively mild, although excessively dry. How could I ever have imagined this to be arid and desolate country? Why, within sight of the camp were at least five villages, each with a slender line of green trees! How could I have thought of Mundigak as being so remote when one could see these green smudges in the distance—and imagine that I had thought the track from Kandahar rough going! Why, by Bugti standards it was a grand trunk road!

Only one thing remained as austere as my memory pictured—our living quarters.

In Sui I had lived in a modern bungalow, air-conditioned (although it is true the conditioners could reduce the highest temperatures by only twelve or fifteen degrees), with unlimited water brought forty miles by pipeline from the Indus, and electricity and power from the natural gas in the ground below. At Mundigak the mud huts were unchanged.

Jean-Marie and Ginette had spent two more seasons at Mundigak since my departure and already had been a fortnight in camp by the time I arrived. Their S.O.S.—"Please come soon, this is our last season and we've no site supervisors!" had been irresistible, at least, for me. My husband, whom I had joined only a few months back, was not so struck with the idea of my careering off into the wilds again.

I had dug out my warm Afghan clothes, had driven the bumpy, dusty fourteen-hour journey to Quetta, from there got a lift on a station-wagon to Kandahar where, battered and travel-stained, I had found Jean-Marie waiting for me at the Hotel de Kandahar.

All the way from Quetta to the frontier town of Chaman we had passed enormous caravans of Kuchhis. For miles the gipsy caravans stretched ahead of us, all progressing from Afghanistan to the warmer Indus Valley—hundreds upon hundreds of camels laden with striped carpet rolls of household goods and doubtless many bolts of smuggled cloth from India that came, via Afghanistan, into Pakistan. Atop the bundles bounced heavy iron cooking pots, black goats-felt tents, tiny children, dogs, chickens and other sundries. Groups of women in rusty black and dark plum garments strode with splendid carefree steps beside their menfolk.

By the roadside other huge caravans had been breaking camp to join the trail. As I got out my new ciné camera and filmed the seemingly endless line, it was as though I was filming one of Cecil B. de Mille's Biblical epics—the Exodus, the march of the Children of Israel through the Wilderness of Sinai. (A few weeks later I was wondering whether the Kuchhis, like many peoples living close to nature, had some prevision of the hard and early winter to come.)

From the top of the Khojak Pass, the frontier town of Chaman was lost in a shimmering heat haze through which I caught a glimpse of the red sand of the Registan desert of Afghanistan. Down in the desert itself we drove along the fine road built by the American M-K Company, on which, instead of the six-hour drive of only three or four years back, the trip to Kandahar now took under an hour and a half.

Spread between the dull grey hills and the patches of vivid red sand, sprawled carpets of mauve desert flowers, paper-crackly everlasting blooms. Thinking of the bare hut at Mundigak and how fond Ginette was of flowers, I picked a large bunch of the delicate, hardy blooms. As we drove I talked to M. Casal.

"Tell me what's been happening—did you finish Mound B"? I asked Jean-Marie. "What did you find under the Colonnade? Is Ebrahim here?" I was full of questions on the journey and Jean-Marie did his best to answer them. "But you must see for yourself tomorrow," he added. "As for Ebrahim, he has not yet come. We have only Ginette and myself and Bruno, a young student who is here for a week or two to learn—and of course Jacques and his wife, Jacqueline—you knew that Jacques married in France last year?"

I had heard the news and was delighted to learn that Jacques, the shy, diffident Jacques, had found a bride and brought her out to Afghanistan.

"Is she an archaeologist?" I asked.

"No, but she's learning fast. We've got her on to clearing the skeletons. . . ."

"Skeletons—then you found a cemetery?" This was wonderful news. Until now we had searched in vain for graves whose long-dead occupants often tell more about their origins and way of life than the whole of the rest of a site.

"Yes, we found it at last, and guess where? Just between Mound A and the camp, where we found the first seven skulls, remember?"

Filled with happy expectations for the morrow, I forgot my weariness as we drove up the last hundred yards to the group of huts and saw the dark shapes of the team waiting to greet us.

L'Idiot, the beautiful Afghan hound, had met with a sad and violent end in Kabul, shot by some trigger-happy soldier. But the camp could not possibly be complete without pets of some kind, and so the Casals had brought Bust, an affectionate, rather silly, black and white cocker, named after the medieval fortress of Qila Bust where he had been born, and Jacques had a slim, black spaniel called Whisky. Ginette had also brought from Kabul a two months old silver grey kitten, soft and fluffy as a Persian, and named, like all French cats, Minou.

Once inside the mess with the brightly-burning oil lamp casting yellow shadows on the walls, we all began to talk at once. Jacques was still beardless after his dramatic shave at the end of my previous stay and though despite that even now hardly a fashion plate, his clothes were considerably less ragged than when I had last seen him. Jacqueline, slim, dark-haired and bright-eyed, was a colourful acquisition to Mundigak in her coral jeans and scarf; Bruno turned out to be a massive, tall young man, thick bushy hair standing on end, horn-rimmed spectacles that gave him an air of studiousness, and who spent most of his free time with his nose in a book.

There were few changes in the housing—my old hut, "*Cottage de Sylvia*," had been altered, enlarged and improved after heavy rains had flooded it out last year, and was now kept as a guest-hut. Jean-Marie and Ginette were still in the "*Maison des Antiquités*," and the Dumarçays were in the "*Villa Dumarçay*" whose construction Jacques had supervised when it was built during my last stay. "All architects live in 'villas'," explained Ginette as she named the various cabins for me. Bruno had a hut up by Ebrahim's and I was in the

"*Palazzo Scarotti*", named after its original occupants in the first season here.

"I hope you do not have a haunting from the ghost of Maricq," laughed Jean-Marie as he unlocked the door, for this had been the tiresome Maricq's abode during my previous visit, and I well remembered his over-zealous attentions.

The first thing to greet me as I walked in was an enormous dung beetle climbing steadily up the wall—this was back to the simple life all right! This cabin was smaller than my previous one, but much warmer since it shared a wall with the kitchen. The bed was in a corner where the wall was heated by the kitchen fire. I was to bless that fire later on. Since a mattress had been provided on my last trip I had merely brought a *rezai* with me—a bright quilt, floral red on one side and sky blue on the other, which I intended to use as a covering when it grew cold. Actually I had to sleep on it for the *charpoy* was strung with an unusually old webbing of knotted string that cut through even the *rezai*.

It was unfortunate that so early in the season I felt cold at night—it must, I assured myself, be the result of living in Sui. If your body has acclimatized itself to living in high temperatures at a low elevation, a sudden transition to a mountain country, even in the warm autumn, must have a drastic effect on the constitution.

As I lay in bed that first night I could hear the cries of a wolf circling the camp, howling mournfully. Ginette had told me that the wolves were unusually bold this year. Many of the workmen who were also shepherds had suffered badly from the nightly raids into their folds: a loss of five or six sheep a night was not unusual despite the heavy-shouldered, barrel-chested watchdogs.

Next morning I opened the cabin door to see the sun streaming in and hear the voices of the workmen singing as they threw their metal bowls in a line on Mound A. I could see that the mound had lost its glorious crown of white colonnade and red doorways and in places the excavations had nearly reached the foot of the hill. One innovation was apparent; this year, teams of donkeys were being used to supplement the manpower; in fact, one man loading two donkeys with earth could do the work of ten men and cost the same as three men. They were a little slower perhaps and donkeys could not be used everywhere, but on the whole the new system was working well. Wages had mounted since I was here last; when work had begun at Mundigak, the standard rate for unskilled labour was eight Afghanis per man per day (about 3*s.* 4*d.*)—the same as they would get with the Americans in Kandahar. Now however, owing to the fact that the Government was in the market with works going on at nearby Shah Maqsud, there was a shortage of manpower and we had to pay fifteen Afghanis which, as Jean-Marie commented with a long face, "means we will have to finish the dig earlier, maybe before all our work is complete".

My first day was to be a leisurely one, and I made the most of it, rising late, taking a shower in the brand-new bath-house (larger than the old one and now attached to the mess room. It even had a mud-pisé sink and room for a clumsy metal wood-burning *bokhari* stove that was to throw out a welcome heat in the icy nights to come, and make showering a pleasure instead of a penance).

Cook had not yet arrived on the scene and one of the Afghan villagers, Omar, was standing in. He was doing remarkably well under Jacqueline's tuition, for she was now official housekeeper, leaving Ginette free to concentrate on archaeological work.

I set off for Mound A to be greeted by an ecstatic Sirdar who was now earning a treble salary aided by two of the family donkeys.

A handsome boy with a cheeky smile and the slanting green eyes of the Hazaras waved a greeting as I passed him with his donkey team.

"You don't remember me, *Khanum Sahib,*" he said reproachfully as I fumbled for his name.

"But of course—it's Ali Gwul, but you've grown so, now you are a man!" I gasped. He smiled proudly.

"They have all been asking when you are coming," smiled Ginette. "Every day they say, 'When is Sylvia *Khanum* coming?' "

Up on the main mound, Jean-Marie, sheltering under the shade of a huge, striped golf umbrella, was carefully scraping at the edge of a fireplace. A whole complex of narrow lanes, with wells, squares and houses had been uncovered some twenty feet and four layers below the colonnaded monument, of which only the damaged eastern portion now remained, and the first fortnight of this present season had been spent demolishing these houses. In fact I had arrived just too late to film anything but the final stages of destruction. Already other dwellings were emerging underneath, orientated on a quite different axis from those that had covered them.

A deep well in perfect preservation which had emerged at the first level of the granaries some thirty feet above, still remained on the edge of the section that had been cut away; it continued down for another forty feet.

The whole mound looked as though someone had sliced in half a giant marble cake topped with candles (the colonnade); the candles had disappeared but one could easily trace the outline of walls, the well, floor levels that dipped perilously, and thick layers of ashes on the section of the "cake" that remained.

As for Mound B—"You know you found something very remarkable there," Jean-Marie told me. "The only complete house that was surrounded by huge buttresses—it must have been an important, fortified building, perhaps belonging to the Governor of the city."

I hastened to Mound B to examine my old site. Yes, it had been extended just where I had warned Sirdar to move the rubbish dump, and strong ramparts and bastions now stretched in all directions; the ramparts with their heavy stone foundations, reached long tentacles as far as the "*Maison des Antiquités*", and now the Casals' hut was left standing on a little isthmus with deep trenches dug on three and a half sides—obviously our whole camp had been constructed over the ramparts and inner defences of the prehistoric city.

Jacqueline was busy working under a shelter made of reed mats, uncovering a seemingly endless series of communal graves just beyond the tool hut and almost in the centre of the camp.

Jacques and Ginette were both working on Mound A and so was Bruno. When Ebrahim arrived he would be finishing a site on a nearby mound on top of which two years back Jean-Marie had revealed tremendously thick walls dug into the rocky formation of the hill but little else.

"I have saved for you the most difficult," Jean-Marie told me. My heart sank.

"Where?" I asked.

He took me around Mound A and led me a quarter of a mile away towards the river, where a crevasse in the hard earth split a field that was utterly devoid of shelter.

I looked at it with foreboding.

"You see," he went on, "according to Jacques' plan it looks as though one outpost of the city wall was on Mound B, another on Mound F where Ebrahim has been working, and there must be one somewhere round here—that would make an angle, so let us see what you can find."

Patting me absent-mindedly on the shoulder, he strode away, his eyes already scanning the parched soil in the hopes of spotting a trace of ancient walls and bastions.

I gave a glance round my new site. This was to be Mound H. Well, let us see what the morrow would bring. Now I must go to collect my workmen.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# *Of Mice and Men*

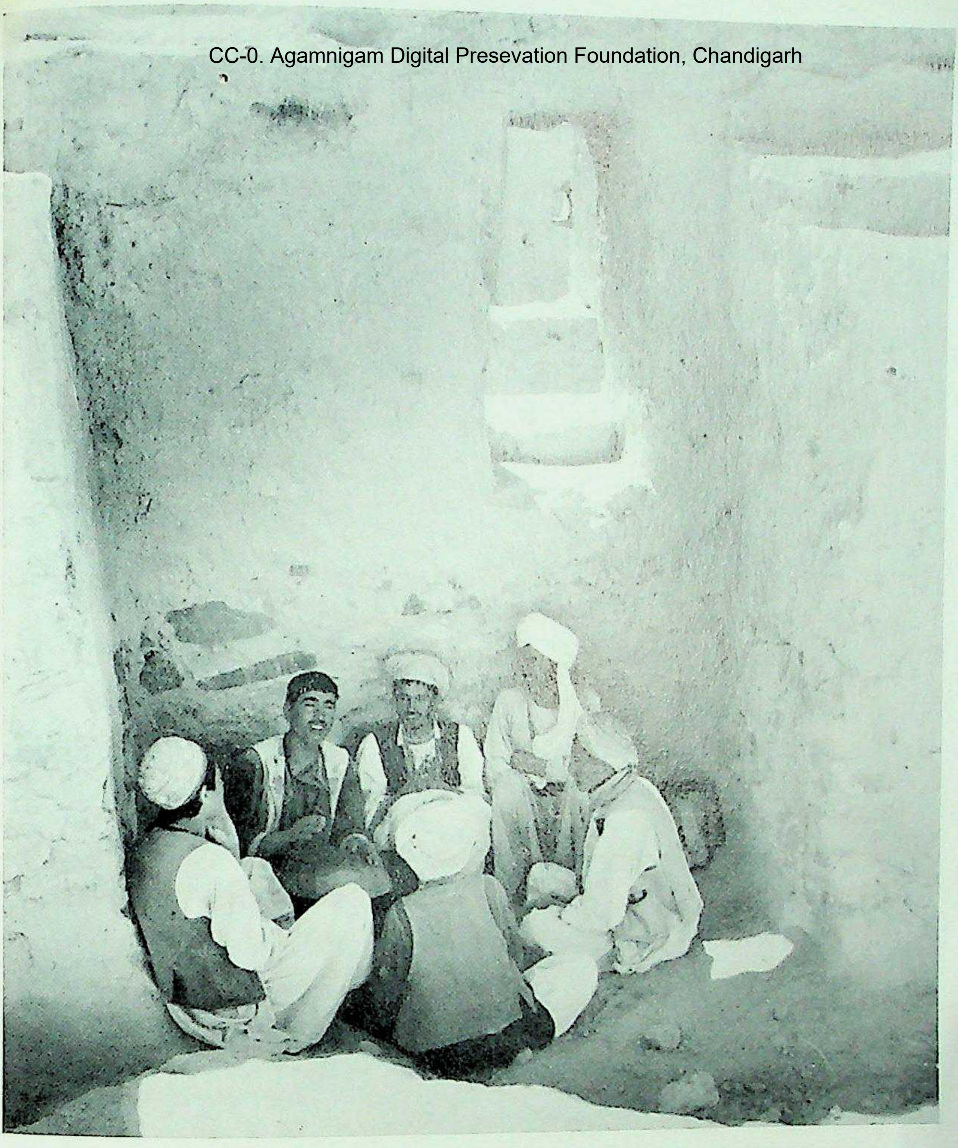
MOUND H WAS an isolated, tantalizing, wind-blown site involving a stumbling march across stony fields, and I hated it from the start. A few days of our tramping back and forth soon fashioned a well-defined track to my 12-ft. by 6-ft. trench which lay a couple of yards from the edge of a small cliff, but I never could develop a great interest in this sterile piece of land.

Of my former team I had only Mashuk still with me, his smile as dazzling as ever, his garments just as disreputable. In a faded mauve turban, bright red shirt and blue waistcoat, he had a saucy, jaunty air about him that made him the generally accepted leader of whatever gang he was with, and as the biggest and most virile of the job-lot I had drawn, Mashuk was fated—or honoured—to be the pick man. He swung that pick with tremendous enthusiasm to begin with, but as the mornings grew hotter and hotter, the early breeze died down and the stubborn ground remained unwilling to give up its secrets, Mashuk's exuberance began visibly to melt.

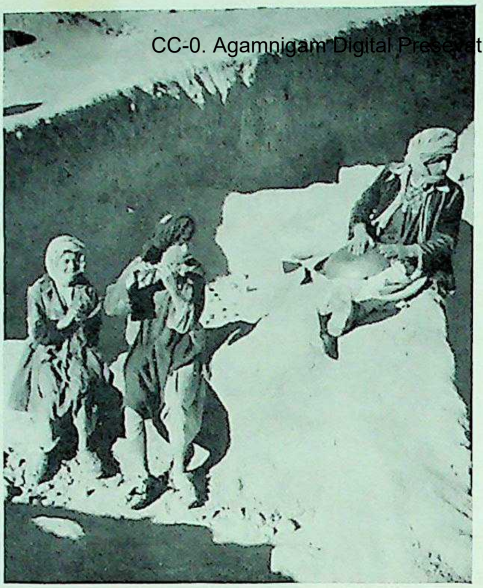
There was little need for a large team at this stage. My assortment of old men and little boys had only to tip the earth over the edge of the low cliff and the *tukri-wallahs* had a job justifying their presence at all. They made an effort by fetching unwanted buckets of water from the camp and running unnecessary messages.

It was tough going in ground as solid and unyielding as granite and about as encouraging—nothing but stones and rock-hard soil.

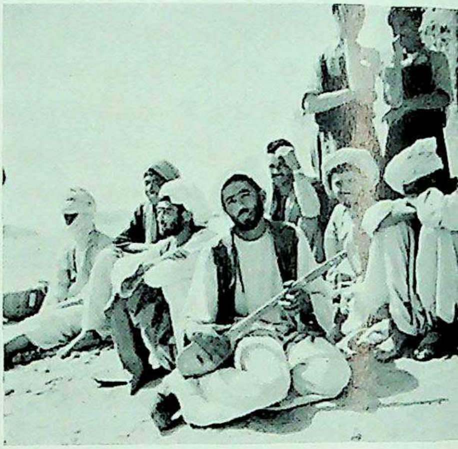
An hour or two went by and the hazel-eyed Fazul arrived slyly from Mound A bearing a message from his cousin Sirdar whose raucous voice I could hear far off, uplifted in song. Why, Sirdar wanted to know, had I not chosen him to join my team? As he saw Fazul talking to me, his hoarse shouts floated across the still air,



Shade from the thick, mud-brick walls (which were on stone foundations) excavated in the residential quarter on Mound B provides welcome relief from the sun's heat during the midday meal. The large openings are doorways.



At midday break everyone relaxed; some slept, others played. The photo on the left was taken on the top of a wall on Mound B; Sirdar is using an upturned *tukri* as an improvised drum while his companions sing to the music of a flute. *Below:* Nasruddin plays an instrument called a *dhambiro*.



*Below:* Sirdar and Piyundah were among the most accomplished of the dancers; here Piyundah performs an improvised devil dance.

adding personal recriminations to those of his messenger. In vain I attempted to explain that Jean-Marie and not I had been responsible for the selection, and that since Sirdar was in charge of a couple of donkeys which would have been wasted here, it was absolutely useless my even asking for his services. Fazul shook his head and wagged his finger at me reproachfully:

"*Khanum Sahib*, Sirdar is very cross with you—he thinks you are no longer his friend—listen!"

From the larger mound Sirdar was really letting forth, his complaint rending the air.

Mashuk, reclining on the ground in a state of apparent exhaustion, raised himself on one elbow to look across the fields to where Jacques was trudging, deep in discussion with Jean-Marie.

"Jacques has now a woman," he commented. "How much did he pay for her?"

Oh dear, here we go already! Before I have a chance even to pick up my basic Pushtu-cum-Farsi I'm asked questions like this! It was difficult to explain how Jacques had managed to get a pretty young wife without payment, for that would have implied that she was worthless, so remembering the French custom of "dot", I gave a guess at what I thought was a good figure.

"Here you must pay 800 Afghanis," groaned Mashuk. "I want a woman myself but I have no money—I would have to save for many years."

Indeed, 800 Afghanis would be more than Mashuk normally earned in several years—he would have to settle for something less idealistic; at least it gave the ugly girls a chance of finding husbands.

At this point, Amanullah emerged furtively from the bottom of the cliff, having edged his way round without being observed from Mound A where he was supposed to be working. Amanullah, as shifty-eyed, thin and mousey as ever, was stroking a handful of thin, straggly hairs sprouting from his chin. He would spend hours looking at this wretched apology for a beard, brushing it with the backs of his fingers, combing it and massaging his chin in an effort to stimulate its growth. Despite the straggly beard, cross-eyes, bent shoulders and knock-knees, he had not one, but two wives.

"The first is thirty-five years old and she is ill in Kandahar," he told me, "and the second is eight years old—but she is no more, she died last year."

I held out eight fingers.

"You really mean *eight* years old?" I asked.

"Yes—but that was no good, for now she is dead."

Amanullah's brother, Bismullah, was one of my *tukri-wallahs*, and now he chipped in. "My wife is five years old—she is young because she is cheap at that age. She is still living with her parents and when she is old enough, maybe in seven or eight years time, then I shall collect her."

The thrifty Bismullah smiled smugly. Later, when I recounted this conversation to Jean-Marie, he grinned. "Those 'mouse' brothers, they share everything they have—one ass between them, one bicycle between them and I am sure only one wife between them—they all take turns."

The fact that I myself had got married since I last saw them, intrigued the men. I had to produce photographs of my husband and give full details. How much had he paid for me, asked Bismullah? I invented some flatteringly high figure.

Mashuk broke in—"I know that in your country you do everything differently—you told us so before," he reminded me. "I think that the husband does not pay, so why you don't have two husbands? You have your one in your country—but here you have one more, you have me!" The thought of this delightful proposal sent him rolling on his back in convulsions of laughter.

I handed him his pickaxe. "You hurry up and dig this hole or I'll give you a fine—five Afghanis," I threatened.

Quickly Mashuk picked up the pickaxe and for the next five minutes hacked away at the unyielding ground like a maniac.

* * * *

For nearly two weeks we dug solidly in our isolation. Every now and then Jean-Marie would come to inspect the hole which had now been extended into an "L" shape right to the edge of the cliff. Never a solitary sherd did we turn up, not the merest indication that the soil had ever been disturbed except on the inner edge where it had been scantily cultivated to a depth of some two or three inches.

"I am so sorry it is so dull for you," Jean-Marie would apologize, especially when the others recounted some fascinating discovery. "But it is necessary that we look thoroughly."

Thoroughly indeed we looked—but to no avail at all.

The owner of the land came striding across the sterile, brick-hard field in hasty anger one morning to reprove me. The fact that we had carefully chosen a corner that was on the very verge of the ancient cultivation, plus the fact that in the six years since Jean-Marie had come here the field had never yet been ploughed or sown, made no difference to the irate owner who was incidentally, one of the hired workmen.

He was already being paid for the use of his horrible little strip of land, but waving his arms wildly he would point to the nearest ancient furrow, daring us to dig farther inland. He was hoping to squeeze yet more gold from the mad foreigners, but in this he was to be disappointed, for we took the greatest pains to avoid touching the cultivated area; however, along the edge of the cliff, a few feet from the bottom of the twenty-foot drop, there seemed to be a layer of potsherds, so the site was extended once more and we dug to the very bottom of the cliff. Several times in the long shadows of the evening sun I imagined I could see traces of walls and with great excitement reported this to Jean-Marie at our evening meal. When he came striding over the fields in the morning, not a sign of a wall would there be. It was the most frustrating site I had ever experienced but Jean-Marie himself, convinced that there was something to be found, was reluctant to give up.

The men became more and more despondent, all naturally hoping for the *baksheesh* that came with discoveries, but even without this spur, negative digging day after day weakened our morale considerably. Maybe we were only a few feet off a site—we found a few uninteresting sherds that might have been dropped accidentally but nowadays we hardly ever bothered to have a pottery basket, for the sherds we found could be carried between two fingers.

With so little to occupy my attention, I got into the habit of taking a sketching pad and tiny box of water colours with me, doing quick sketches of the gang. From where we were digging, too, the view of Mound A was a fascinating one, with the ragged, peaked mountains as a backdrop, two or three of the camp huts just visible round the corner, and the mound itself with its silhouetted frieze of donkeys and men constantly moving up and down the slopes. I painted the scene in its varying moods—in the soft pink glow of the early morning when the mountain peaks were veiled in a golden-peach mist; in the evening when they were grape-black against a turquoise sky, and in daytime when a torrid sun mercilessly revealed every hard grey crevice like the wrinkles on the face of some ancient hag.

I had a Kuchhi workman called Madrazar on the team, a quiet, sober fellow with a full, black, bushy beard and bobbed hair in contrast to the shaven skulls of the Afghans. He wore the old-style lavishly-smocked shirt that whirled out like a parachute when he turned, full sleeves and elaborate embroidery and many patches of tiny pieces of many-coloured material so that it was hard to find a square inch of the original cloth.

Madrazar had a small son, Malaghai, an enchanting little boy of about three, with a little red cap, an embroidered smock and no pants. Malaghai was the darling of the camp. He solemnly joined his father on the site and working with a miniature pick sturdily hammered away at the ground. When pay-day came round he would line up with the men outside the window of Jean-Marie's hut to receive his pay with the rest—an Afghani or two that sent him proudly away, clutching his wages firmly.

Malaghai would hammer away on the site for a while, then he would throw down his pick and dance with great solemnity, pirouetting round and round, singing a monotonous little song to accompany himself, and waving his arms in imitation of the grown-up dancers, all to great applause. There were times when he tired of this performance and wandered down the camp, to hang about the cookhouse door like most small boys.

One evening I went back to have my shower as usual to find all the bottles and jars on my shelf—the lowest of six—jumbled and tumbled together, some on the ground with tops off and contents missing. Gone altogether was a very precious bottle of eye lotion with a glass dropper, the only one I had. The culprit of course was little Malaghai who could just reach this shelf with its tantalizing array of delectable mysteries. He was found with the empty eye lotion bottle clasped tenderly to his small chest, but whether he had drunk the contents or not we never discovered. After that I made sure I had nothing harmful on my bathroom shelf.

Madrazar was full of apologies and insisted on feeding me with some brightly-coloured sticky sweets that he brought wrapped in the grubby end of his turban. Since I hated to hurt his feelings, I just had to swallow the sweets and hope my distaste was not too obvious.

The days went by monotonously. Ebrahim had arrived and was now digging on the top of a mound several hundred yards to the west, where he had started work the previous season. Only a few inches below the surface he was discovering the strong, solid walls of a stone fortress or its foundations, for as work progressed it seemed that this fortress had been begun but never finished, the builders soon finding that they were having to dig into solid rock. The beginnings of a well could be seen, obviously abandoned when the going became too tough, but only a few yards away, more complete buildings were found, with formidable walls twelve feet thick; they had brick outer edges and a centre core of stone; with the walls came an encouraging number of small finds, potsherds and figurines.

* * * *

It was still early October, yet in contrast to previous years the mornings were chilly and a thin wind whistled around us on many an afternoon that in other years would have been unbearably hot. Since this was to be the last season of work at Mundigak, some of the huts had become a trifle dilapidated, but it seemed hardly worth while spending much time or money on repairing them for so short a stay. From the dried reeds and packed mud on the beams of my hut, a constant shower of dirt fell on to my bed which had become a highway for the mice with whom I shared the cabin. Being next door to the cookhouse, the mice congregated here in large numbers and had made a thoroughfare all along the beams, burrowing through the mud-pisé wall into the kitchen. Day and night the little monsters would scuttle around, not only along the beams above but up and down the walls, behind the reed mats tacked round my bed, across the table, take a good nibble at the papers there for their hors d'oeuvres, a chew at the plastic dress bags for dessert, and a good dose of detergent powder which was also kept in plastic bags. As I discovered abruptly only a few days after my arrival, they enjoyed a steady main course of the string that formed the basis of my bed, already worn and knotted in a score of places.

On my last visit the mice had eaten a hole in the string *charpoy* and it had let me down just as I was leaving. This year they lost no time at all and within five days they had chewed through fifteen strings and made a hole big enough for me to fall through one night with a disturbing bump, there not being even a mattress to soften the fall.

We placed mouse traps under the bed—the mice merely took the bread which baited them, refusing to touch meat, cheese or fish. In the bathroom they nested in Ginette's straw hat on the top shelf, ate through plastic sponge bags leaving shreds all over the shelves, nibbling at Polythene bottles and ate half a carton of Jean-Marie's precious American cigarettes.

As I lay on my *charpoy* at night, trying in vain to sleep to the thud of tiny feet pounding over my pillow, I decided that never again would I be guilty of using the phrase, "quiet as a mouse".

## CHAPTER TWENTY

# *Wings over Mundigak*

"IF ONLY," SIGHED Jean-Marie, "if only we could see some aerial photos of Mundigak—*then* we should see where to dig and not waste time as we seem to be doing on your Mound H." I couldn't have agreed more enthusiastically, and it was like the answer to a prayer when a truckload of cheerful American airmen bounded up to the mess one day, sand-covered and bruised from the trip which had proved much rougher and longer than they had expected. They were all flying to Saigon by slow hops, stopping off to make aerial maps of under-developed countries for one of the United Nations organizations. They were to spend five weeks in Afghanistan and after a chance meeting with Jean-Marie in Kandahar, they had come out to do a ground recce of Mundigak before taking some aerial photos for us.

With their gay, patterned shirts and their uninhibited exuberance, they poured into our small mess, happily offering us tins of some horrible mixture called root-beer and "Coke"—the latter drinkable but to our obviously decadent tastes, not nearly as appetizing as the bottle of liquid which I had just placed on the table as my contribution to the mess. None of us was what you might call a heavy drinker—indeed, our ration was one small peg in the evenings, but alcohol of any kind is completely unobtainable in Afghanistan, so that one drink in a tall glass, after our day's work, always came as a life saver. It was all the more shattering to see the precious bottle, which would have lasted us a week, empty like a bathtub with the plug out—and only last night Jean-Marie had opened the last case of what should have been a dozen bottles, which he had bought through the Embassy, to find there were two bottles missing, so now we wouldn't even have that one small nightcap. But who could grudge these happy-go-lucky visitors a drink! We relaxed and turned the visit into a party. Two days later their orange-coloured plane appeared in the blue sky, swooping low to beat up the camp at zero feet with a victory roll and proceeded to take the long-awaited pictures.

It was weeks before Jean-Marie had the news that the enlargements were ready but even then the Afghan Government would not allow him to keep them—Mundigak was Top Secret! However, Jean-Marie did manage to borrow them for twenty-four hours, so after our evening meal was cleared away and the servants gone to bed, he locked the mess door, drew close the curtains, and with the air of a conspirator, brought out the longed-for prints.

The dig showed up marvellously and we could now see the master plan, with the perfect grid of town-planning on Mound A, the streets exactly aligned with those on Mound B. There was the clear outline of a city wall embracing a much larger area than we had imagined, and there from Ebrahim's site stretched the bastions and wall, out to Mound B, to Jean-Marie's hut, down to the mess and main camp, and round Mound A. In the midst of all this appeared a perfect circle—a grave, we all thought at once, and next morning Jean-Marie rushed to examine it, only to discover a great ant-hill! However, further close study of the prints did give the clue to what later proved a second cemetery and one that Jean-Marie had thought must exist but had not been able to find earlier.

When it came to choosing a new place for me to dig, we were to be disappointed, for one whole section of photographs had been taken of the barren mountain country north of the camp, instead of southwards, between Mound A and the river, where we hoped to find new sites. At last, when everyone had pored over the photographs and studied them by the Petromax, Jean-Marie packed them up in his brief case and unlocked the door of the mess. Next day the photographs would be returned to Kandahar.

During the two seasons' work since I had last been in Mundigak, there had been a number of unusual finds. Ginette had been working on the extension to my old site on Mound B and had found a small marble table complete with six-inch legs—we knew now that our civilized inhabitants of Mundigak at the time of the colonnaded monument had used just the same kind of tables for their meals as Indian potentates use in their palaces today. Surrounding the table had been a number of small earthenware goblets and drinking flasks—how well one could imagine the Governor of Mundigak reclining on a gay, striped rug, surrounded by his family and friends, lifting the delicate goblets from the marble table to quaff—what? Could he have enjoyed the juice of the grape? It was very possible. Had the earliest settlers at Mundigak any connexion with those of the Indus Valley—perhaps with those recently discovered peoples of Kot Diji, the prehistoric site near Khairpur, in Sind? According to Dr. F. A. Khan, Pakistan's Director-General of Archaeology, the upper levels of this considerable settlement were Harappan—that is, about 2,300 B.C.—2,500 B.C., but the earlier levels were 500-700 years earlier, the earliest yet found in Pakistan, and I had seen for myself the two main portions of Kot Diji, which, similar to Mundigak, consisted of the citadel area (forty feet high—about the same height as the colonnaded monument), and the outer fringes of the city inhabited by the artisan classes.

Kot Diji houses were properly orientated with spacious rooms. Built with stone foundations and mud-brick superstructures they had now-perished roofs that were probably mud-plastered with reed mats. Bronze arrowheads, stone implements, pottery vessels, clay bangles and large-size community ovens; five-foot-wide sun-dried mud-brick walls and a massive outer defensive wall of undressed stone block foundations and mud-bricks above—these all bore a strong family resemblance to Mundigak. There were external defensive towers built at intervals along the city wall with, in the upper levels, a thick deposit of charred material—evidence of a violent conflagration which destroyed Kot Diji and its inhabitants and paved the way for the occupation of the Harappans. To imagine a connexion between the two civilizations may be sheer wishful thinking—nobody has suggested yet where the early Kot Dijians came from—but the Harappans who succeeded them had a proved connexion with Mesopotamia. Was it not possible that the route they had taken led through southern Afghanistan?

To my eye, during my very cursory and unescorted tour of Kot Diji, it seemed that Mundigak of the Colonnaded Monument had been occupied by an even higher cultural civilization than Kot Diji—the workmanship of the Mundigak buildings in general was altogether more artistic. As to the small finds, these I had only seen in photographs, but they seemed to be much cruder than the delicately formed "brandy balloons" and other domestic utensils of Mundigak.

One of the most exciting finds on our dig since I had left—and one I had not seen, since it had already gone with the marble table to the museum in Kabul—was a carved stone head which Jean-Marie had found during the previous season. This was unique and with the pale terracotta figurines we had found during my previous stay evidenced a very high standard of culture and artistic development.

Jacqueline was busy every day working on the graveyard that had been found inside the camp itself, in the angle between Ebrahim's hut and the Casals'. Here, not a yard away from the spot dug in the first season where the seven skeletons had been found jumbled together and assumed to be a solitary, hasty burial, an extensive cemetery had been uncovered. There had been a few individual graves in the upper levels, but under these the graves had changed their format and each was about one metre square, containing from six to nine skeletons of men, women and children, all jumbled within a small brick edging not more than six inches high, and covered with stamped earth. What was puzzling about these graves was the fact that not one single piece of funeral furniture had been found so far—not a single earthernware jar to contain food for the dead, not a drinking vessel to help quench their thirst, none of the usual household utensils usually connected with primitive burials and so helpful to archaeologists.

Another strange thing was the fact that all the bones appeared to have been defleshed before burial, as though, in the Zoroastrian fashion of the Parsis, they had been exposed to the elements first, but unlike the Parsi custom, instead of being allowed to drop into pits and crumble into dust, these had been carefully collected and buried in a separate place.

I was still working on my barren, unproductive hillside when Jacqueline announced excitedly that she had found a child's tiny blue and white bead bracelet. Had Jean-Marie drawn the edge of the site only a fraction farther in, this unique find would have remained covered by the sand. Oddly enough there were no children's bones among those in the grave. There was, just to confuse the issue, one complete adult arm outstretched, complete with all fingers—a most unusual occurrence in this jumble of odd bones.

We all rushed excitedly to photograph Jacqueline's grave under the shadowless high noon. Reed mats protected Jacqueline from the heat of the sun as she crouched between the bones in the small confines of the grave, to scrape and brush and blow away the sand before spraying on a preservative.

That day at lunch, as we cracked our almonds in a prehistoric pestle and mortar—there were hundreds on Mundigak and we had found that they were much more efficient in producing unbroken nuts from the shells than modern nutcrackers—we discussed the mystery of the graves. Where had the dead been defleshed, and how? Jacqueline's "Maccabees", as Jean-Marie called the skeletons, were the main topic of conversation these days. Why had one arm remained perfect as though it had been tumbled into the grave with the flesh still on it—had it been a mistake? Had the child's bracelet fallen off some small girl's hand when the grave was being covered?

The morning after our examination of the photos dawned freezingly cold. I had two pairs of warm socks and a heavy pair of frontier sandals, but my socks would not go into these and I was reduced to wearing them with tennis shoes. How bitterly I regretted leaving behind my fur-lined bootees which had seemed so unnecessary for this trip. Surely Mundigak could never be as cold as Kabul, nearly four hundred miles farther north and twice as high, had been in December and January!

As soon as we arrived at the site in the mornings the men, particularly one decrepit old boy called Mulla Adad, would spend the first ten minutes chopping down stunted camel-thorn bushes to make a bonfire that would flare up briefly before work began. In those few moments they gathered around, thrusting bare hands and feet into the flames with impunity, while I hovered on the outskirts, huddled into my quilted *chupan* and shivering miserably.

"Never is it cold like this at this time of year," exclaimed Ginette, her blue eyes flashing in exasperation as she pulled on her own fur-lined jacket and boots.

Nearly every day I was presented with *baksheesh* of some kind—Shah Wali, my handsome, grey-eyed, would-be travelling companion of the first visit, one of the four mullahs of Aroorkh, would tramp up the hillside bringing me a rosy pomegranate, a green apple or a pear, raisins, currants, figs and nuts. One day, Madrazar the Kuchhi dug inside his grubby tunic to produce a round, smooth white lump which he indicated I should eat. I looked at it dubiously for it was remarkably like a fertility symbol or a hard piece of chalk—"It is *krut, krut*," repeated Madrazar impatiently. "*Krut*," I discovered to be cheese made from goat's milk and dried to the hardness of a stone. Heavily salted it will keep for years. Much as I missed fresh cheese (we had only the tinned, pasteurized, soapy variety in camp), this proved too much even for my catholic taste; after making a pretence of eating it I had to give up.

The mouse-brother Amanullah announced that day that he wanted to go to Kandahar with Mad Amin to fetch water and provisions—"my wife is there and she is ill," explained Amanullah pathetically. When morning came and the truck was being prepared for the journey, Amanullah arrived bearing two enormous sacks of wheat he planned to sell in the bazaar, and I was hardly surprised that evening when he returned saying that he had been far too busy selling his wheat at a good price, to find time to visit his wife!

Not in the least abashed at being found out in his flagrant lies, Amanullah would produce a piece of grubby scrap paper and a stub of red pencil and beg me for a list of English words which he would solemnly note down in readiness for some fancied journey abroad. During the period I had been away, brother Bismullah had picked up a smattering of French and the smallest of the "Mouse" brothers, little cross-eyed Njamtullah had graduated to sweeping floors, although he was still as small, still maintained he was fifteen years old and still looked an undernourished twelve.

We had undoubtedly reached rock-bottom on my hillside dig and even Jean-Marie had to admit that there was absolutely nothing to be interpreted by the most hopeful inspection of its deep, straight sides, despite the odds and ends of sherds we had found along the dry bed of the streamlet.

So together we tramped over the land between Mound A and the river, looking for a more promising site. Finally Jean-Marie chose a spot on a mound about a quarter of a mile east of the main mound which involved a trek down the steep sides of Mound A under constant fire of dumped loads of rubble from gangs working up on the side, into a deep stream bed and up the other side to the mound. The day after we had inspected the aerial photos I marked out a good wide trench from the crown of the hill to the bottom, to just where the furrows of ancient cultivation appeared. Almost immediately the first pick was put into the soil we began to find the tops of walls covered by only a few centimetres of blown sand.

At this evidence of things to come, all our spirits rose. Despite the cloudy day, with the mountains quite swallowed up in dust-storms, the air round the new site of Mound G was clear. Before lunchtime arrived we had uncovered three brick walls running diagonally across the trench and, lying down full length on the ground, I was busy blowing and brushing and scraping at the sides of the walls to disclose traces of red and white paint.

Suddenly the long weary days of sitting hoping for something to appear, searching with wistful eyes, trying to make the hours go more quickly with sketching and sips of water—these had vanished like the mountains in the dust. Now there simply was not enough time in the day. I never noticed my parched throat, I hated the idea of knocking off for a meal—always the next few moments were going to reveal something even more exciting and I was desperately afraid to look away in case I missed the first trace of a find.

Just when I needed strong men the most, our roll-call had been answered by the smallest number of all, for there was illness in the villages—some said mumps, some smallpox, some measles. Whatever it was, the Kuchhis very wisely refused to mix with the villagers and stayed away from the dig. So now I was working with a very much depleted gang. In spite of this, in five days on the new site we had accomplished more than in two weeks on the old site; we had found a growing complex of walls and rooms with narrow, weathered brick walls built on top of good, broad ones; unexpected angles, steps and still more paint on the sides of the walls.

On this site we could profitably use donkeys to carry the loads of earth from the trench down to the hollows in the fields where the scattered earth made good fertilizer. I was given an ancient grey-beard for this task, an old man who had been employed as a *tukri wallah* when the Casals had begun work at Mundigak but who was now too old for anything so energetic. The sight of this ancient with his donkey, however, put Sirdar into a tremendous rage. He had understood why I was unable to have him in my gang on the first site—we were not using donkeys at all—but to use someone else's donkeys now, that was a deadly insult.

I tried to convince him that it was only because ours was a comparatively gentle slope involving little effort for the old man, a former mullah, whereas Sirdar was doing a strenuous climb up and down the still-steep sides of Mound A; but he shook his head sorrowfully and declared that I could not be his friend any longer.

Poor Sirdar, it was a little hard on him.

We encountered trouble. The soil from the trenches was scattered over the fields below, but Khairullah charged up the first morning to protest, telling us we were spoiling his land. This was the first time we were told the land was his, and although by this time he should have known better, he was convinced the soil was a bad thing. At this moment our old, sinister-looking friend the Governor of Kar Karez, Haji Hashim Khan, appeared on the scene, took my arm in his and walked me down the side of the mound confidentially, a knowing smile on his smooth countenance. Spreading out his arms he indicated the fields to the east of my mound.

"There," he said blandly—"spread your earth there. Those are my fields and I too would like to have some of the good soil."

This involved a longer walk for the men who carried the metal bowls and they were not at all pleased at the idea, but for the next fifteen minutes Haji Hashim Khan directed operations and sent the team scurrying down the side and dumping their loads on his land. After that I noticed Khairullah was singularly thoughtful and a day or two later he was sneaking round the side of the Mound rounding up half a dozen *tukri-wallahs* and urging them to leave their loads on his fields.

Khairullah had prospered in the last year and he was now caretaker and supervisor of the tools, since Jean-Marie had dismissed Nasruddin and his old father for helping themselves too freely to the property of the French Government. It was embarrassing therefore, when my attention was called one day to a visitor to the site and I greeted a most down-at-heel Nasruddin with several days' growth of beard, a ragged, dirty turban, grubby tunic and baggy trousers in contrast to the scented, spruce dandy of eighteen months before. His first request was for *baksheesh* for the musical instrument that I had refused to buy from him on my last visit. It seemed that this miserable specimen of the two-stringed, country fiddle had been left in the camp after all and now the mice had made a home inside the parchment-covered gourd. Just as he was reaching the peak of arm-waving demonstration, Nasruddin turned on his heel and made off abruptly towards the river.

"It is *Char Mariz* coming," explained Mashuk and I looked over my shoulder towards the camp. Sure enough "Four Brains", as the men had nicknamed Jean-Marie, punning on his name, was loping towards us and Nasruddin was in no mood to face his one-time employer.

Jacqueline was finding more skeletons on her site and for the first time a small, egg-shaped bowl of yellow pottery inside one of the graves. Alabaster bowls and tiny pieces of square bone with serrated edges, faience ornaments with small circles, a dot in the centre—these were turning up on Ebrahim's site. On my site we were finding nothing but buildings so far, but the site itself was expanding rapidly. It was already a race against time, and it was difficult to know in which direction to dig next. Finally I had three or four gangs working for me at the same time—not so easy as it might sound, because I had to keep an eye on all of them at once, at the same time measuring walls, sifting sand, brushing paintwork and digging out mysterious holes while exchanging backchat with Sirdar who had been sent to join us, much to his delight.

The mornings were now bitterly cold and Jean-Marie dug out an old pair of his own boots to lend me. They were too large for him and on me they were battleships and must have weighed at least fifteen pounds. My feet ached desperately with the weight of them, but at least I could wear several pairs of socks, and my toes no longer felt as though they would drop off when the thermometer registered zero Centigrade and the wind blew from the snow-covered hills.

"Never before have we seen snow on those mountains before the New Year," said Jean-Marie, amazed.

All of the lovely colonnade on Mound A had long ago disappeared and only a small portion of the same level remained at the western end of the Mound—the rest had been sliced right down to the seventh level where Ginette was now busily uncovering a square mud-brick column in the middle of a room. But for the fact that it stood only just over four feet high one might have taken it for a roof support, like those used today in the open-sided summer shelters of Afghanistan and Baluchistan.

Still I had no mysteries on my site, only walls, floors and more walls and floors. The only mysterious thing I found was a small, perfectly round hole in a mud-brick wall and inside the hole, a perfect round ball. "Ah," I thought delightedly, "now we are coming to something promising—a prehistoric game of some kind? A strange architectural feature?" I picked up the ball excitedly, expecting it to be heavy as a sling-stone, but it was light as a piece of straw. Mashuk took it from me with a chuckle and broke open the cocoon to reveal a hibernating dung-beetle!

There followed days when the thermometer remained below freezing all day long, and others when not only the mountains but even the nearby Mound A and the camp were completely lost in flying sand that never stopped blowing the entire day.

One blissfully warm, clear morning the temperature rose ten degrees Centigrade above the previous day, only to be followed at midday by a wind that arose from nowhere curtaining sky, mountains, even the man in the next site, in a heavy veil of flying sand.

Walking the few yards from my hut to the mess involved covering head and face in a zipped ski anorak, while Mound G, exposed as it was to all the winds of heaven, became the setting for a tribe of headless ghosts bumping into each other with turbaned faces, feeling around the dig like a party of schoolchildren playing blind man's buff.

On my site work continued at top speed. Mashuk began to complain that his arms ached with wielding the heavy pick, so while he rested during the shovelling, Abdullah Jan who was his special companion, a saucy, rosy-cheeked youngster, pressed his mouth to the aching spots, blowing hard. This was to take away the pain, he explained solemnly, and pulling up his ragged sleeve he showed me a scabby scar on his arm bearing the perfect imprint of a full set of adult teeth; his father had not been content with blowing, but had really bitten him and drawn blood in an effort to cure a particularly persistent ache.

"If you have pains here," Mashuk rubbed his stomach, "then you can take some *Khwar*, holy earth from the grave of Shah Maqsud, and swallow it, and you will be cured," he affirmed.

I noticed that despite these famous cures Ginette's out-patient department was as busy as ever; nowadays it was Jacqueline who attended the patients, leaving Ginette completely free to devote herself to the dig. Jacqueline was in fact a tremendous asset to the whole expedition. She was a slender, pretty girl with soft, brown curls and wide, brown eyes, and before her marriage to Jacques had barely even heard of archaeology. Certainly she had never dreamed she was to spend the first months of her married life tucked away in a remote, barren desert, living in a mud hut with only the most crude necessities of life, instead of having a neat little house in the country or a smart flat in Paris, wearing pretty clothes, playing hostess to her husband's friends and attending the latest shows and concerts. She had taken over also Ginette's former task of housekeeping for the camp, and she would carry a huge bunch of keys fastened to the pocket of her coral-coloured jeans. We no longer had the flour-and-water porridge for breakfast and the first Friday I was in Mundigak, Jacqueline surprised us with a huge sponge cake iced with a mixture of chocolate, gin and walnuts. Next week it was mocca, and later on a huge batch of profiteroles served with a chocolate and gin sauce. When she had finished her housekeeping chores, Jacqueline brushed away at the "Maccabees" or mended broken sherds and figurines.

Almost every day now Sirdar's little brother Wali would appear on the horizon with his flock of fat-tailed sheep and energetic goats, his big stick and his golden, crop-eared hound. They would spend an hour or two on the dig, the hound lying down in some small patch of shade, wagging his tufted stump of a tail when I came to pat him, Wali gabbling away like a nonstop talking machine, his wide, ugly mouth stretched in an engaging grin. One day he showed me a small amber bead he had picked up during his walks over the hills and Sirdar, now firmly ensconced as one of my team, rushed up to me clutching the string of cotton round his throat. An assortment of prehistoric beads gathered wherever his sharp eyes had spotted them, in the gullies and on the mounds surrounding the dig, little, round, red beads, flat, white discs, oblong, striped amber, blue and black beads were strung on the cotton and worn like a necklace. It was Sirdar's lucky charm, but the moment I expressed admiration he snapped at the cotton fiercely, breaking it in his impatience and dropping the beads on the ground. As he scrabbled in the dust for them, breaking one delicate white bead in the process, he proffered them in a horny hand—"Here *Khanum Sahib*, these are for you—take them and wear them". Nothing I could do would persuade him to take them back again. Knowing how temperamental Sirdar was, I accepted them without further argument.

Going to my cabin that night I noticed a newcomer by my door. The flashlight shone on two tiny bright button eyes glowing green in the darkness of a small hole by the door, and then on top of the first pair, a second appeared. A pair of toads had taken up residence and were now backing cautiously into their new abode. I wondered hopefully whether toads ate hornets, for this year there was a veritable plague of these huge creatures who had a marked preference for nesting in the wire netting covering our windows. What with mice, hornets, toads and scorpions, not to mention snakes and spiders, we had our fair share of natural life in Mundigak.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# *The Sultan's Palace*

FOR FIVE NIGHTS I had tossed in my cabin, getting less and less sleep because of those unspeakable mice; I was depressed and grey with weariness when Jean-Marie sprang a surprise that made me forget mice and bad weather. Some Swedish friends of the Casals who had been staying with us for three days were about to leave for Kabul, but were to make a detour to visit Lashkar Gah, an historic site about a hundred miles from Mundigak, where the French delegation had been working some years previously. Lashkar Gah was the huge palace of the Ghaznavid Sultans, the matchless garden city that had been destroyed by Genghis Khan, and close by was the famous fortress of Qila Bust with its much-photographed archway.

Mad Amin was to drive them over and to take Bruno who would be joining the northern Afghan team; Jean-Marie suggested that if they could get transport back from Lashkari Bazaar, the nearby village where the party was to spend the night, then Mad Amin would be free to return to Mundigak the same day. In that case I might have the day off to go with them. Much to my delight they decided to take the chance—if luck failed we would all return to Kandahar the same day. So, full of anticipation, we piled into the station wagon soon after dawn. Once on to the main road we made good time for this link between Kandahar, Girishk and Lashkari Bazaar, where work was in progress on the Helmand Valley irrigation schemes, had been built by the American M-K Company.

There was little to be seen on the journey—high mountains always in view, flat red sand and the occasional dusty Afghan village. We rolled into Lashkari Bazaar and through the one main street of open-fronted shops to the neat blocks of whitewashed bungalows with blue-jeaned children playing baseball on the grass—unmistakably the American colony. Every house was signposted with its occupant's name, so there was no difficulty in tracking down Mr. Patterson, to whom the Swedes had a letter of introduction. Since the Americans were constantly travelling to and from Kandahar they hoped to arrange for a lift on one of their trucks. Alas, Mr. Patterson had left for Kabul that very morning, but his wife guided us to the Transport Office and within minutes the lift to Kandahar had been arranged. Now all that we needed were beds for the night.

The growing importance of the desert outpost had prompted the Afghan Government to build a State Hotel here. We trooped over to this dazzling piece of architecture, a cross between a super swimming pool and a cinema. Inside it was even more of a surprise; there were no dormitory bedrooms here but pleasant, twin-bedded rooms with a bathroom between two rooms. It was the manager, a quick-witted, bright-eyed gentleman in a Karakuli fur cap. He spread his hands apologetically when we asked about food. Alas, food was not available here but why did we not go to the American Staff House? "All foreigners go there," he told us. "There you can eat—and sleep too!"

So a little dubiously—because none of the Americans we had encountered had even mentioned this amenity—we followed the directions till we came to a low, rambling building surrounded by a colourfully fragrant garden.

"But of course, come right in," welcomed the manager. "Naturally you can eat here—want to stay the night? Sure we've got rooms, only too happy," and he promptly led us to what at that moment was my idea of Paradise. Delightful bed-sitting rooms furnished in gay contemporary colours, and with deep, easy armchairs—and long-forgotten luxury, well-sprung divan beds with soft pillows and fresh bed linen. With a sigh I sank on to one of the beds and longed for just one hour's sleep. But I was here to do sightseeing—and by evening Mad Amin and I would have to make the return journey to Mundigak. If tomorrow had been a Friday I would have stayed, but Jean-Marie would have to supervise my site if I wasn't there, and we were far enough behind schedule as it was.

A hasty meal in the dining room, and off we set for Lashkar Gah. The immense, burnt-brick walls surrounding palace after palace, and the courtyards, baths, mosques and now empty pools stretched for mile after mile along the banks of the Helmand River. The Palace had been a city in itself, the home of thousands of warriors and their families. Looking now from the wide battlements to the surrounding desert countryside, it was hard to imagine that only a thousand years ago this had been a thickly-populated and fertile area. I looked down on the Turkish baths with their elaborate hot-water system, through delicately arched doorways to enchanting views of the river; I wandered through secluded courtyards, walls of which had once been hung with cool turquoise and blue tiles. In the vast banqueting hall with its three main niches set in the walls, the raised platforms once adorned with colourful tiles, Firdausi the Persian poet laureate had sung his glorious songs before the Sultan, and won a gold piece for every golden line. These palaces built, by Subuktagin in A.D. 976 when he had seized the fortress of Bust, had once been the centre of the civilized Eastern world. Later on, Sultan Mahmud "Mahmud of Ghazni", the "Destroyer of Idols", whose rule had extended from Turkestan to the Indian Ocean, and from Hamadan in Persia to Lahore in India, the Great Mahmud himself had made Ghazni and Bust the treasure houses of the vast booty he had wrenched from his many expeditions into India. At the same time, he had filled these rich halls with the pick of Oriental culture—the finest musicians, dancers and poets that his world knew.

As I wandered through the two *Iwans*, vast halls open on one side, I could visualize the immense concourse of eager listeners to the competitions held for classical musicians and poets from Persia and India. In the luxurious steam baths, Sultan Mahmud must have lounged at his ease while feasting his eyes on the views through the cunningly contrived miradors looking over the wide river bed, lush orchards and parks.

Until recently it has been believed that Islam has always banned any representation of the human figure in art, but Dr. Schlumberger's discovery of some fifty enormous, full-length paintings of warriors marching round the walls of the Hall of Audience at Lashkar Gah, seemed to disprove this theory. Now it is accepted that in the early days of Islam there was no such prohibition imposed on artists and sculptors. Commenting on his spectacular find, Dr. Schlumberger pointed out the startling similarities between these and the huge figures adorning the palace walls at Susa—possibly those of Lashkar Gah were also portraits of Mahmud's Royal Bodyguard?

This then, was the place of which poets sang, "Oh, King, human eye has not seen throughout the world a place more beautiful than this!" This lovely palace surrounded by orchards and flower gardens was one of the wonders of the ancient world, and it is the area from whence the Zoroastrians expect a new Saviour of the World.

I shut my ears to the distant footsteps of my companions, lost in the depths of the labyrinthian palace, and projected myself back to those wonderful days of barbaric yet highly cultured splendour. "They say the lion and the lizard keep the courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep . . ."—watching the tiny lizards sunning themselves in regal solitude, Omar Khayyám's immortal lines seemed particularly apt.

Nobody knows exactly when Lashkar Gah was abandoned. Possibly when the Ghorid Sultan Ala-u-din Jahan-suz, the "Destroyer of the Earth", who had already vanquished Ghazni and razed it to the ground, sacked Qila Bust in A.D. 1150; at latest it must have been A.D. 1222 when the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan swept over Afghanistan completing the devastation, destroying canals and wells and turning cities and palaces into heaps of ruins to be buried in the desert sands. One only knows that this once glorious city, the "most beautiful in the world", was quickly forgotten, its very whereabouts lost in the drifting sands, so that it remained remote and undisturbed for nearly a thousand years. Six years' work by the French Archaeological Delegation unveiled the glories of this "City of Soldiers", as Lashkar Gah literally means. Its removable treasures, including the huge wall portraits, were taken to the Kabul Museum. Yet even the bare bones of this great palace-city evoked the ghosts of those terrible invaders from the north.

We climbed down from the battlements and drove through a series of enormous gateways across wide courtyards to strike across country towards Qila Bust at the junction of two great rivers, the Helmand and the Arghandab. We skirted a fast-flowing tributary of the Helmand, climbed a rise and there, through the heat haze, we saw a high hill, patches of cultivation and a small oasis at its foot. On the crown was the famous citadel of Qila Bust.

A road wound up the side of the hill through a massive gateway and into a small clearing from which the upper portion of the hill, on which was the citadel, rose steeply. I felt bitterly disappointed; the famous archway, always photographed from half-way up the hill so that it appears to be set in empty desert, actually is surrounded by workmen's or caretakers' huts and dominated by the fortress above.

From the slopes of the upper hill we looked down on the archway to see the neat workman-like corrugated-iron roofing capping it. We could see, too, the restorations of concrete steps and garishly painted moulding and tiles replacing the one-time delicacy of green, blue and yellow tiles. Puffing, panting and scarlet in the face, I dragged myself to the first level spot, following mountaineer Bruno up the steepest approach on hands and knees. There on the other side, was the normal, easy approach up a flight of steps!

Jacques had spoken of the great well, one of the largest known, and as we hung over the edge trying to glimpse the bottom, a snake lazily uncoiled its silver length from one of the landings round the immense brick structure. My fingers caught on a piece of wood framework round this well that had never run dry, even in the hottest summer. It had provided water for a huge garrison. But already it was time for us to turn back to Lashkari Bazaar. I craved for a soft bed for one night, and half yielded to temptation. Then conscience made a coward of me, I bade farewell and turned for Mundigak with Mad Amin.

We were making good time and I was already dreaming of supper and bed, when Mad Amin turned a stricken face to me and announced that we needed more petrol—he had forgotten to fill up at Lashkari Bazaar. So for the next hour we practically prayed the station wagon along the road, coasting down slight slopes and hardly daring to breathe. We crawled to the Kandahar pump on a mixture of faith and a few drops of petrol and half an hour later, having searched in all the neighbouring *chai khanas* to find the owner of the pump that he might unlock it and produce some service, we went on towards Mundigak.

A tantalizing aroma of freshly-ground coffee assailed my senses. I began to feel extremely hungry—it was now about nine o'clock and the recent rains and perilous state of the bridges slowed up our progress through the darkness. All the shops had long been left behind and in any case, I had never come across a coffee shop—tea, yes, but coffee is a rare luxury in Afghanistan. Turning my head, I fumbled with the cloth bundle on the floor behind me—it was stuffed with flaps of *nan* bread which Mad Amin had bought in Kandahar; the *nan* was still warm, freshly-baked, and the coffee smell became stronger. So *that* was the explanation! In Mundigak the bread was always a few days old by the time we fetched it from the storeroom but in this fragrant, tender-crisp state, it was irresistible.

The bridges were certainly a hazard—three times Mad Amin had to get out and survey a diversion round the mud and wattle constructions that had collapsed under the weight of the overladen pilgrim trucks to Shah Maqsud, and the relentless rains. Only this spring the Governor of Kandahar, visiting Mundigak for the first time after constant invitations from Jean-Marie during the past few years, set off with his retinue only to find the first of the bridges broken. Held up for several hours while a temporary repair was made, he was so furious that he fined the villagers responsible for its upkeep, 25,000 Afghanis, which at the official rate of forty-five Afghanis to the £1, is quite a heavy penalty for a small village. Even so, every time Mad Amin made the trip to Kandahar he had to patch up at least one bridge.

I recalled Jean-Marie's story of the immensely corpulent landowner in Seistan who is also immensely wealthy; he owns two cars, one completely battered Chevrolet and one Ford in slightly less battered condition. Despite the fact that there are no roads at all in his territory, he insists on travelling everywhere by car, with all his retinue of some twenty hangers-on. Imagine then, this corpulent landowner sitting in state in the back of his car, with followers crammed into every space, on the roof, on the bonnet, clinging to back and sides. Whenever they reach a nullah or a patch of soft sand, the followers scramble off the car, the landowner remains seated regally inside, and his retinue lift up the vehicle bodily, carrying it across the obstruction. Truly a triumph of the powers of "civilization".

On reaching camp we found that during the day Akhtar Mahmad, the professional cook who should have arrived from Kabul long ago, had at last arrived after waiting in Kandahar for three days for Mad Amin. I had been eating so well since my arrival in Mundigak, especially filling up with starchy foods like cakes, bread, potatoes, jam and sugar, none of which I normally ate, that within two weeks I had had to let out my trousers an inch and found it quite impossible to fasten my warmest pair. Now, although our diet remained the same, I found myself losing weight as the weeks went by and I put in a good deal of manual labour on the dig.

Outside the cookhouse, chickens destined for the pot scratched happily in the dust—infinitely healthier than my own in Baluchistan, where they were pampered with a fine, airy run and special food bought from forty miles away! At night the Mundigak chickens were herded into a tiny mud hole stopped up with a board to keep away marauding foxes and wolves. The king of the roost was a magnificent cockerel belonging to Ebrahim—it had been given to him as *baksheesh*. Nobody, least of all Ebrahim, had the heart to kill this gorgeous creature with the petrol green and golden plumage and orange ruffle. Not for this bird the communal refuge at night—by day he would stalk on his own affairs round the camp, by night he would retire to a corner of Jacqueline's dig and brave the perils of wild animals.

The dogs delighted in teasing the cockerel. One of them would bounce up boisterously, barking furiously and trying to force the bird to budge. The cock stood his ground firmly, glaring at the dog defiantly, turning slowly to confront him wherever he moved, sidestepping sudden rushes with the neatness and dexterity of a matador, always seizing any opportunity to dart forward to give a peck on the nose, which usually caused his tormentor to run for shelter pursued by the triumphant cockerel with wings flapping victoriously. It was only when the two dogs worked as a team, one in front and one behind, that the bird was forced to retreat, leaving some of his gorgeous tail feathers in the mouth of Bust or Whisky.

For the rest of the time the cockerel would wander round the dig, standing on the edge to inspect the work with gravity. He would also hop up to the mess windowsill to peck at a corn cob, cast a lordly eye over the newcomers to the chicken house, and establish himself in the most comfortable angle of the cookhouse.

The spaniels had provided something of a puzzle for the Afghan villagers. Since all Afghan dogs were huge, big-chested, crop-eared hounds kept solely to guard flocks and villages, no-one had ever seen a creature so small, with such long, floppy ears, and moreover, a creature kept for no useful purpose whatsoever. After watching them play together one day, both dogs grasping an end of a stick in their mouths and running together down the mound, one of the men scratched his head in complete bewilderment and asked, "Is it then, by any chance, some kind of dog?"

One afternoon I walked up the side of my dig to hear wild shouts and yells mingled with low, menacing, throaty growls—the shepherd boy, Wali's hound was being pushed unwillingly towards a strange watchdog, and both circled stiff-legged, suspicious, urged by their owners to do battle.

"That is their business, to fight," explained Wali when I protested.

"Well, no fights on *this* dig," I said firmly.

The only result was for the crop-eared, barrel-chested animals and their owners to disappear round the nearest hill from whence came fresh shouts and growls to indicate that the fight was on and the bets placed. Next morning, a sad-looking hound limped into my site and crept to a sheltered corner, nursing a bitten hind-quarter and ragged ear stumps—Wali had lost his bet.

It turned cold; much colder than it had been even at the end of my first season in Mundigak. Ginette found a feather sleeping bag that Jean-Marie had used all through the years he had been a prisoner of war of the Germans. With that I slept with some degree of warmth and comfort. The weather was certainly being capricious—a cold winter's day was followed by sandstorms; dust devils started up in the early morning and whirled madly across the valley, to gather into one huge, dancing cloud, enveloping us completely. Work was doubly exhausting under these conditions for we had to wrap up like Arctic explorers with heavy goggles and hoods drawn over our faces. Gradually we came to see a pattern in the weather. When the moon was waxing, the weather grew warmer and we were treated to a steady diet of sandstorms. As the moon waned, bitter cold winds blew from the snow-capped mountains.

One Thursday evening there was an eclipse of the moon.

"That is what they call here, the moon '*Gerifted*'—taking away of the moon," explained Ebrahim next day. "The villagers suppose it to be a sign of Allah's anger with them so maybe now we shall have them working harder for the next few days!"

Archaeology is monotonous work most of the while, for ninety-nine per cent of it is just sheer hard slogging with your eyes skinned to notice even the smallest change in the soil. This year we were being miserably handicapped by the weather. We had every right to expect that from October to December the days would be sunny and clear. Rain, if it came at all in this district, came in springtime; snow, if it snowed at all so far south, came only on the mountain tops in January or February. But we were to experience rain, hail, snow and even fog, so that our hopes of finishing at Mundigak by the end of the year were fading dismally day by day.

It was in October that we had the first rains. The fleecy, cotton-wool clouds made a welcome note of interest in my photographs—it was the first time I had seen clouds at Mundigak. The sunrises and sunsets were fantastic in their glory, splashes of warm peach and glowing gold and flame painted the undersides of the clouds as they hovered just below the mountain peaks, and purple, cobalt and dove-grey shaded their tops. When the warm mornings brought rain in the afternoons, at first a shower, next day a longer, heavier shower, admiration turned to disgust. We were helpless when the mud-pisé structures we were digging became softened by rain. All we could do was to abandon the portion we were working on and move to another section, first sacrificing the top six inches of walls to find dry earth below.

One day, when the rain had made work impossible, Ginette and

I drove into Kandahar to see the Italian doctor at the M-K Company—we were neither of us feeling fit—and afterwards we ate a picnic lunch in the small, secluded garden behind a popular tea house fronting the main road. We were led through the dark and crowded *chai-khana* itself, with the blare of Radio Kabul pounding into our ears, past the kitchens with their immense open cauldrons bubbling away, and into the courtyard with a well in the centre, pots of geraniums and a line of small wooden platforms along one whitewashed wall. A rug was spread for us on one of these, and Ginette Mad Amin and I arranged ourselves cross-legged, while the proprietor, all smiles, brought us plates of *pilao* and vegetable curry, a small Gardner-ware pot of green tea, the lid tied to the handle, and three, tiny, handle-less cups. We added our own hard-boiled eggs and fruit, and as we ate, watched the busyness of the kitchens, a man in bright blue *purtak* and shirt painting a neighbouring wall, a series of lean, striped cats wandering in and out of a small hole cut into the bottom of the opposite wall to give them ingress to the courtyard.

The rain began again as we left. So we splashed ankle-deep through the muddy bazaars, looking for bargains. I bought some black cotton material, for Sirdar's mother was to make me an Afghan tunic—the latest and most chic style in the valley just now was white *purtak* trousers, black tunic with white stitching and embroidery, and black turban. Ginette went off on her own affairs and we met at the station wagon.

"Perhaps you like this?" asked Ginette diffidently, holding out a small Baluch prayer rug for my inspection. I exclaimed at the russet, white and black colour scheme, and the diamond pattern, for it was the same type as a larger prayer rug I had bought in Kalat State several years before.

"Good," smiled Ginette, "then I will buy the other one, it is for your wedding present," trotting off down the road to the carpet bazaar. I was completely taken by surprise. So this is what Ginette and Jean-Marie had been plotting last night in the mess! So that was why, when I had been bargaining for a pair of brightly-striped Herati saddle cloths with long, purple fringes to use on our horses in Baluchistan, and had asked Ginette to lend me some Afghanis if need be, she had looked pensive and had counted her store of notes in a hurry!

Later on, flushed with the triumph of possession, Ginette and I climbed to the roof of the "Arg", Government Palace, in the main square of Kandahar. Below us was the wide square fringed with piles of melons, green, yellow, golden in the sun; behind, the dome of Ahmad Shah Durrani's tomb glistening and sparkling—across the road the bazaars and the shallow bumps of the domed houses of Kandahar. Far away, round the outskirts of the city, stood the fantastically weathered mountains. We climbed down the steep stairs and crossed the road to the Post Office to collect our mail. A pool in the middle of the courtyard was surrounded by a vine-covered pergola and brilliant flower beds. The mullah was calling the *Azaan* from the minar of the mosque, and two customers from the Post Office hurried out to wash at the pool, to spread their prayer mats facing Mecca in the west and to join their brethren wherever they happened to be—bargaining in the market, walking down the streets or main squares—to send their united prayers to Heaven.

An old woman in a black shawl which she clutched so that her disagreeable, pinched features could be seen, had followed an elderly man with a load of parcels into the courtyard. While Mad Amin was undertaking the long and involved negotiations necessary to send letters by airmail, this old harridan kept up a nonstop stream of high-pitched abuse which, to her obvious fury, the elderly man blandly ignored.

At last Mad Amin appeared from the gloomy depths and long queues of the Post Office bearing a sheaf of letters and a large wooden box which he announced was for me.

"I wonder if it could be my boots—I sent an S.O.S. to Baluchistan for them," I speculated. The box was firmly nailed and sealed and I nursed it all the way back to Mundigak, over broken bridges which Mad Amin had to mend with large stones and branches, as usual, and then we were back in camp. Jean-Marie took the box from me to open it.

"Oh, Mad Amin can do it," I protested, as he opened the tool box and took out a pair of large pliers.

"What—let Mad Amin touch this? Why, it's so well fastened that

I'm sure your husband has packed something more precious than boots here," laughed Jean-Marie hopefully, thinking of our sadly depleted cellar.

This had not occurred to me before but while he was prising open the box, Jacqueline tapped me on the shoulder to show me a glorious, large blue bowl of Gardner-ware.

"How lovely," I gasped admiringly—I had two small bowls in England and had always admired the clear blues and reds of this attractive china.

"It is for you," said Jacqueline shyly—"a little remembrance of your wedding from Jacques and me."

I was completely flabbergasted—at the Dumarçay's request, Ginette had bought the bowl in Kandahar today. What truly warm-hearted friends I had and what delightful, tangible souvenirs of my stay with the Casals and Dumarçays!

My stammered thanks were cut short by a cry from Jean-Marie. He pulled out the last nail and lifted the lid to remove straw packing and produce, with an air of triumph, a ski boot dripping with pieces of straw.

I looked inside. There, wrapped in a woollen sock, was half a bottle of the precious golden liquid that was as welcome as the sight of the traditional St. Bernard to a snowbound traveller.

Jacques paused in winding up the gramophone, Jacqueline's knitting needles ceased their clacking, Ginette looked up from her notebook.

"Aah," sighed Jean-Marie, a wide smile spreading across his face, his hazel eyes sparkling mischievously. "Your husband is indeed a man—he has saved our lives, Sylvia. Come, let us drink to his continuing good health!"

The dogs barked excitedly, cook thrust an inquiring head round the door, and Ginette brought out her electronic flash to record photographically the celebration as we lifted our glasses to my thoughtful spouse in the Sui Desert.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# The Family Grows

KHAIRULLAH, WHO WAS now the camp caretaker, was obviously making a good thing of his job for he actually had a bicycle, the only one in the district. It was funny to watch him wobbling over the corrugated tracks to Sheerga, but even though we laughed, we had to admire his courage in even attempting to ride the machine. His three brothers would trot along behind. One morning Khairullah arrived in camp, bumping perilously over the stones and trying to balance a wriggling sack on the handlebars at the same time.

Horrible squeaks and cries of distress seeped through the sacking and when Khairullah breathlessly and triumphantly opened the bag, out tumbled a tiny bewildered scrap of marmalade-coloured kitten, terrified, starved and obviously ill.

It made a beeline for the darkest corner of the mess, under the string *charpoy* and there it stayed, trembling and mewing, defying all attempts to entice it out.

"It is for you, this new Minou," Ginette explained—"it is to kill the mice in your hut."

So down I went on hands and knees and eventually captured the frail bundle of skimpy fur. Holding the trembling little body in my hands I saw that the kitten was so small that it could have opened its eyes only in the last few weeks. We brought out the little aluminium bowl that had belonged to Minou the First and filled it with warm milk. The kitten looked away in distress, still mewing painfully. I dipped a finger into the milk and offered it—the kitten turned away its small head in disgust. I tried pushing the little pink nose into the milk and still the kitten remained unimpressed, its mouth firmly closed except when it protested. Milk it appeared to find quite uninteresting, and as for playing games—trailing cotton reels, pieces of string, feathers, all left it completely disinterested and bewildered.

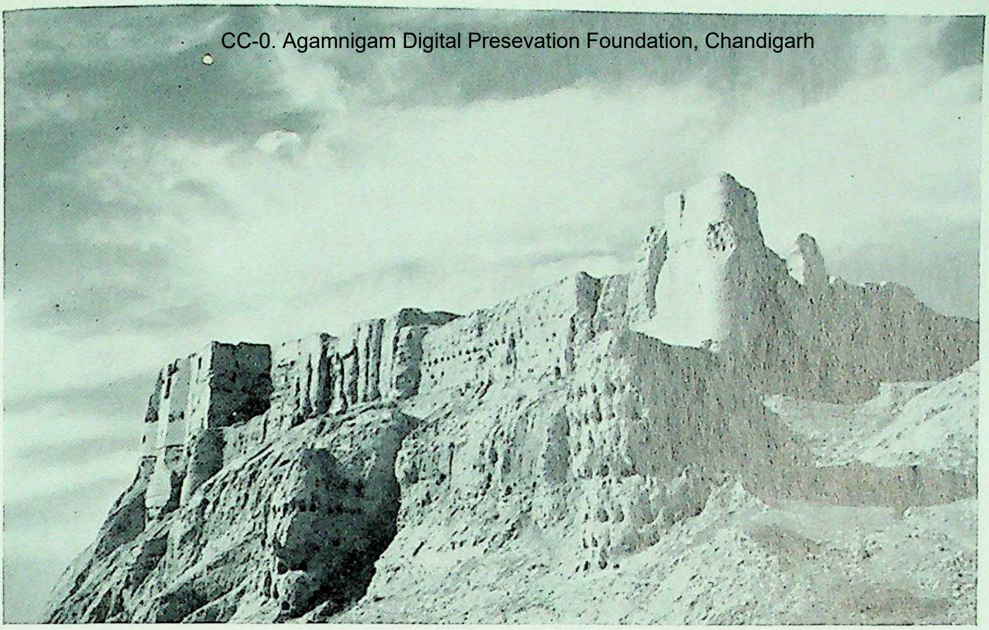
I took it to my cabin and once more it took refuge in the darkest corner under my *charpoy*. That evening I tried the milk diet again, with scraps of meat, and tentatively it began to eat and drink. Once it acquired the taste for food, the kitten over-ate and spent days being violently sick, but not once did it disgrace itself; ignorant little Afghan outcast though it might be, the marmalade-coloured kitten used the bowl of earth in the corner of the hut, as though it had been house-trained from birth.

Trembling still, Minou II spent the first night curled up on my pillow, every now and then edging nearer for reassurance. Thirty-six hours later it stopped trembling and at last began to purr.

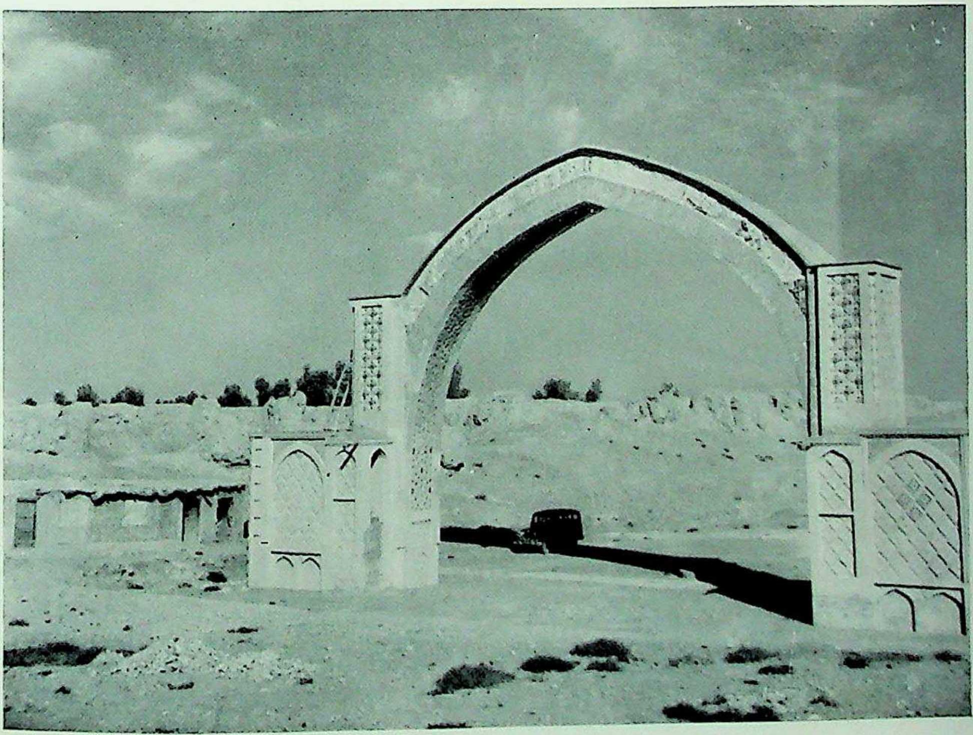
The unaccustomed rich diet upset my starveling kitten. One night I had just climbed into bed when Minou began moaning softly, the cries growing louder and more terrifying till soon the kitten was screaming with pain, its amber eyes wide with fright. When I tried to soothe the small creature, it spat at me in terror, a small paw flashing out with claws extended, and for three distressing hours the cries went on. Minou was now sleeping in a small wicker basket lined with cotton wool and an old towel. The basket sat on the mud shelf at the head of my bed, right against the warm kitchen wall. About midnight, when the pitiful cries had begun to grow weaker and the breathing more laboured, Minou fell out of the basket on to the shelf and then, legs wobbling, attempted to climb down to the floor towards the bowl of earth. Even at this stage I had to wrap my hands in a towel to protect them from those sharp claws before I could lift the still protesting kitten down to the floor.

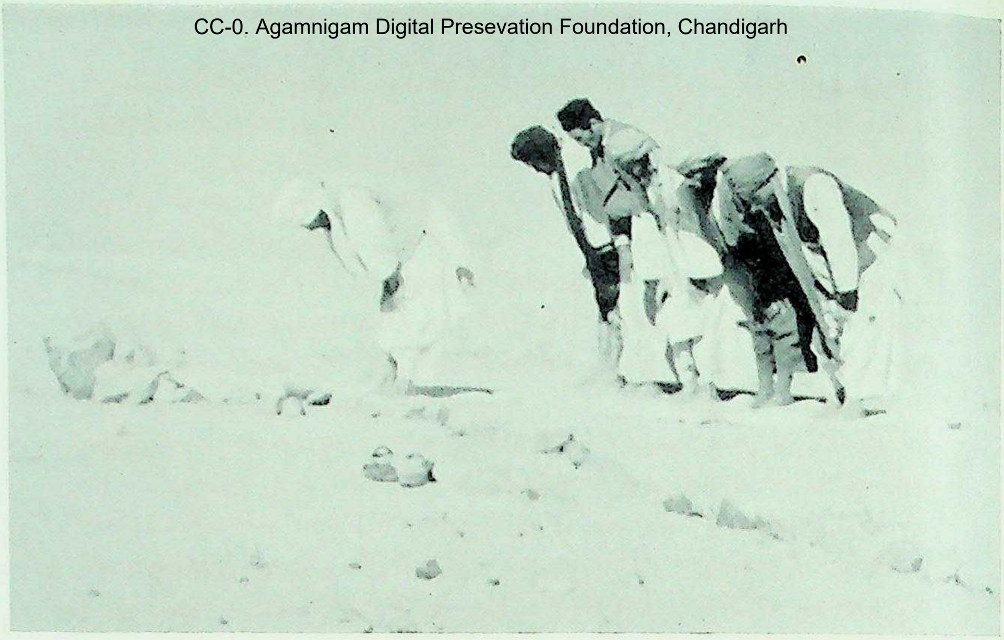
Once Minou had used the bowl of earth, his feeble little legs collapsed and the pathetic little bundle of fur crumpled on the cold, draughty floor.

What on earth could I do? Everyone in camp was long asleep—I was wretchedly ignorant of animals and how to look after them but I was quite sure the kitten must be dying. How could anything survive this agony—much less an undernourished little kitten? Despite its pain, it was still fighting, still trying to scratch if I attempted to stroke it. I crushed half an aspirin in milk and tried to get the kitten



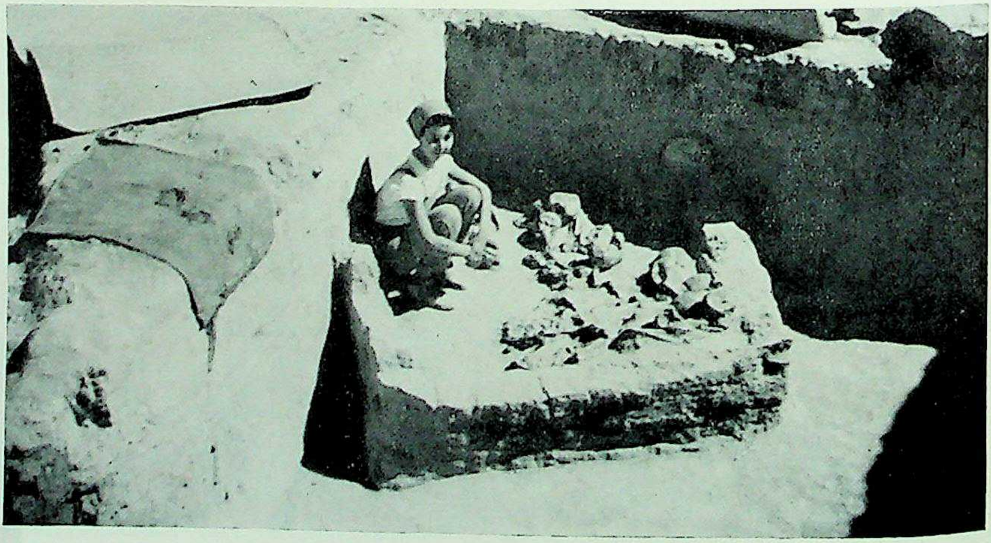
*Above:* The ruined, but still impressive, walls of the medieval castle of Qila Bust in Seistan. (See page 215.) *Below:* The famous archway at Qila Bust; it has been restored and now is prosaically roofed with corrugated iron.





*Above:* A prayer ground (*masjid*) was outlined with prehistoric potsherds and here Mullah Rapoor, dressed in spotless white, led midday prayers. Each man brought a piece of cloth to use as a prayer mat.

*Below:* For a long time the only grave we found was that of a lone Muslim whose remains, with due ceremony and much delay, had to be re-buried elsewhere before work could proceed. (See page 229.) When at last a prehistoric grave was found it contained the jumbled remains of seven skeletons. It was Jacqueline's job to clear away the sand, using paint brushes, teaspoons and infinite patience.



to lick it off my finger—maybe a few grains disappeared, no more. I covered the little body with a towel and began to caress the rough fur. After a time the little kitten fell into the sleep of exhaustion.

I was pretty tired myself by this time and as I turned out the hurricane lamp on the mud shelf, I was depressingly sure that in the morning I would find a stiff little corpse on the floor.

The alarm clock went off at half-past five, a grey dawn filtered through the window, and a wide-eyed kitten was staring up at me as though bewildered to find itself still there. From that day on, Minou II grew more and more handsome, more strong and more self-willed. He hated to leave my side even for an hour or two.

Soon afterwards, Khairullah produced two more kittens in the camp; they were the same age and obviously of the same family as my Minou, but both were more placid, fatter and not half as handsome. It was only now that, rubbing his long nose slyly, Khairullah confessed that he had brought me the weakest of the litter, the kitten that had always been ailing and that everyone had expected to die.

"But it was so thin—at least you could have fed it," I protested.

Khairullah was plainly aghast at the mere suggestion. Feed a kitten—what a crazy idea! "We have too little for ourselves—there is nothing to spare for cats—they must find food, hunt, catch the mice and birds," he explained reasonably enough.

My Minou, instead of welcoming its relatives to Mundigak, spat, scratched and deliberately turned his back on them whenever they approached. If we put a communal bowl of food for the kittens to share, Minou II would turn away proudly as the two newcomers rushed for the bowl. If we put out individual bowls, Minou II would make a point of filching food from the others, then rush to eat his own share as well.

All the kittens were coloured marmalade and white, one being curiously spotted, like a leopard; this was appropriated by the cook. Somehow the kittens at Mundigak never did get any names; once the three of them were ensconced in camp, they were all called Minou, but when one in particular was referred to, it was "Number One" for mine, "Number Two" for the mess cat, and "Number Three" for the cook's. Number Three knew its place and it would stay contentedly by the kitchen stove or sun itself in the doorway, Number Two would sleep with the Casals and it wasn't long before Number One became reconciled to the presence of the intruders and played hide-and-seek round the curtains with Number Two, while Three would peer through the window like Little Orphan Annie.

It is not really prejudice that makes me boast of Number One's good looks, for there is no doubt at all that he was the handsomest, most intelligent and liveliest of the kittens. He had a definite personality—cheeky, defiant, argumentative—he would grumble to himself when put down off the table or invited to eat something he didn't like. Before long he was playing tentatively with the dogs and following me across the hazardous obstacle course from the camp to my site.

This new site had become large and unwieldy—far too big for one person to supervise efficiently—and Jean-Marie tried to share part of his time with me. The original trench I had marked out down the side of the mound now reached a depth of between fifteen and twenty feet and had touched virgin soil; it was more than a hundred feet long and for over sixty feet of this was lined with a solid, whitewashed wall a yard thick. At the northern end, this wall formed a right-angle with another, only three inches narrower. Here I found a perfectly sound flooring with red paint still clinging to it and thick white paint on the inner side of the wall. A flight of what seemed to have been wide, triangular steps, now badly damaged, led to a lower level, and along the length of the main wall first one, then another floor would appear, with here and there more walls at right angles. In the main wall itself doorsteps only a few inches below the surface appeared at regular intervals, just an inch or two of the doorway itself remaining with red paint still clinging.

The doorways led into a series of rooms, all barely below the surface level: first a complex of small, narrow rooms, some with painted walls and red doorways, and then into larger, square rooms. In all this large area, not a single bead, not a potsherd, not a figurine or a seal could we find. While I worried and wondered if I had missed something, even Jean-Marie's sharp, hazel eyes were unable to find the slightest trace of a small find on Mound G. On their respective sites everyone else seemed to be unearthing alabaster bowls, figurines, bracelets, beads and seals.

"But maybe it is a *ziggurat* you are finding," Jean-Marie grinned at me one day. "If that is so, it will be very important, the farthest that has yet been found in the East."

*Ziggurat?* Well, possibly—it was all such a mystery, so many levels, so many stairs and terraces, and all without signs of habitation, that it might well have served as some kind of religious building. Another theory put forward over the mess table was that the "cells" might have been where the corpses were laid until the flesh disappeared and the bones were then re-interred in Jacqueline's cemetery.

It could be held that my red-painted doorways set amid the small remains of the walls in which they stood indicated that this last building must have been on the surface and the final one of the occupation, long ago destroyed by either natural or human causes. I had pushed out more sites from the main trench and was finding ever-larger rooms south of my "cells". South of these again, almost at the foot of the mound and crossed by the main track from Aroorkh to Mundigak, were the large stone foundations of the main walls themselves. Caravans still passed along the track; a handsome village headman in ankle-length, fur-lined *chupan*, leading a string of camels; a group of donkeys bearing darkly-veiled womenfolk; a band of gaily-dressed Kuchhis who would stop to pass the time of day with those of their brethren working on the dig and squat on the edge to look wonderingly and sometimes even pityingly at these crazy foreigners.

Kuchhi women began to make pilgrimages to the camp, with the women from the surrounding villages. Pausing at a discreet distance they would signal me to come away from the men to talk to them. Invariably they wanted medical attention. Veils would be lifted, backs turned to the camp, and frightful sores and wounds would be revealed in the pathetic and trusting hope that we could cure them.

"*Khanum Sahib*, my sister is coming to see you—she is badly hurt," said Abdul one day—Abdul was one of the *tukri-wallahs*, a dashing young blade clad in the height of local fashion, trousers and tunic all in black with white stitching. He pointed down the slope to three women standing half-hidden in the hollow, and seizing my shirt he urged me towards them.

The two older women were dressed in the usual rusty black but Abdul's sister was a spotty-faced young girl in her teens.

"What is the matter?" I asked one of the older women who had a possessive, maternal air about her. The older woman babbled something incomprehensible and seized the girl's dress at the neck. Shrinking, the girl put up her hand and drew her veil across her face. Her mother slapped roughly at her hands and pulled her towards me—"*Meera, meera,*—look!" she urged, and tearing open the girl's dress, plunged in a wrinkled brown hand and pulled out her breast as though it was a piece of over-ripe fruit. In fact that's just what the revolting suppurating sore looked like.

"It was her baby—it bit her," explained the mother.

I looked again at the wound and the girl, now resigned, nodded her head. "Yes, my baby was too hungry," she added.

"But how long ago did this happen?" I asked.

"Oh, several weeks now."

"And how old is your baby?"

"It is one month old, *Khanum Sahib*!"

Finally the girl confessed that it was not her baby but her husband who had bitten her so passionately!

* * * *

Kuchhi men and women alike carry their children slung in a shawl over their backs, hanging like inert parcels. The camp mascot, little Malaghai would be placed in a big shawl, his father would gather up the ends, twist them, then sling him across his shoulder just like a plumber's kit bag, to carry the sleepy little boy back to the black goat-hair tent at night.

Just at this time I was having to cope with a certain amount of tension and emotional strain on my site. Ginette had quite forgotten the men and their various personal rivalries; Akram, my expert Hazara wall and door finder, had been inseparable from fellow Hazara Ramazan last season, but had since replaced him in his affections by Fazul. Overlooking this point, Ginette had sent all three to work together for me: disastrous jealousy resulted. Ramazan and Fazul spent their days vying with each other for a share of Akram's good graces; Akram, tall and handsome, ignored Ramazan completely and as foreman of his own particular job put Fazul to work to find the important floors and walls. Fazul, a teenager who had only just begun to learn the job, was by no means as expert as Ramazan, and many were the walls he invented, floors he destroyed and doorways he damaged before we broke up the threesome. Even so, the undercurrents of these personal relationships disturbed the harmony of our working group so that there were times when I found the sight of Ramazan's normally cheerful but now disconsolate features almost heartbreaking.

One evening Jean-Marie climbed down into the southernmost "cell" to inspect a curious double wall—one against the other—that I had been uncovering. As he jumped into the deep pit, he put out his hand to steady himself and a piece of soil fell down at his feet. He picked it up; it was a small bone. Slipping the bone into his jacket pocket, Jean-Marie reached up with his long, flat-bladed kitchen knife, and scraped away at a spot about three feet from the surface.

"See—human bones," he whispered, revealing a brittle white object about an inch long. Hastily he patted it back into place and covered it with soil.

"Too near the surface to be old," he explained. "It is probably an early Muslim burial cut into the site maybe a thousand years ago, so we must be very cautious. If the men know of this now there will be a strike. We must talk to the 'chaplain'."

Next day a little procession wound its way across to the dig. Mullah Rapoor, the "resident chaplain", shoulders hunched beneath his clean white shirt, hands clasped behind his back, led the way, followed by Bismullah, Khairullah and an assortment of small boys.

The Mullah, his gentle, kindly face wearing his usual placid smile, squatted on the edge of the dig and directed operations. Akram was summoned from his patient scraping at what looked like a fireplace, and was put to supervising the others. Gently Akram began to blow away the sand from the bones and to brush carefully with a small paintbrush. Handling the bones as though they were of the finest china, he began to hand them up, one by one. The Mullah collected them in his lap.

For the remainder of the day work on my site might just as well have been suspended altogether. My best workmen were engaged on uncovering the skeleton and the others were irresistibly drawn to that corner of the dig, despite pleas and threats. Next day only a third of the skeleton had been removed—the long length of it was stretched out on top of the wall, cut into one side of the doorway. Akram was plodding along with maddening slowness, using as much meticulousness as if he was working on a prehistoric skeleton that had to remain intact for a museum.

It so happened that we were all at a standstill on the rest of the dig—walls, floors, doors still kept turning up, and the men could not continue digging until the way was clear—that meant the *tukri-wallahs* were standing around waiting, not to mention the shovellers and the donkeys.

Bone by separate bone, the skeleton was being carefully and tenderly handed up to Mullah Rapoor. Jean-Marie lost patience. He exploded. "Hurry, hurry—there is no need to brush every bone and to blow away the sand—take it all at once, we do not need to keep it all in order."

Akram's slant eyes disappeared altogether into the creases of his Mongol face—the Mullah turned a scandalized countenance upon him and the men looked pained and shocked.

"But this is a Muslim, this is no 'Maccabee'!" cried Akram. "Should we not take more care with his bones than with those heathen?"

Not trusting himself to reply, Jean-Marie hunched his shoulders and strode away with an exasperated sigh.

Two days later the job was complete. The Mullah, watching every move with hawk eyes, forbade me to desecrate the bones by photographing the operation. Collecting all the bones together he transferred the skeleton to a clean white shroud which he had demanded from Jean-Marie. Bismullah and Khairullah each grasped an end of the cloth and set off for the far hills. Two steps behind, watching to see that nothing was dropped, walked the Mullah, behind him, Akram with a bowl containing odd fragments that might or might not belong to the whole. From the dig every head was turned to watch the small procession as it wound out of sight to a spot where eager helpers had dug a fresh grave, and here, with ritual washing and prayers, our intruder was re-interred. At last we could go back to tracing the fourth wall in the room and for a short while, work continued uneventfully.

When the time for the midday break drew near, one or other of the men would invariably clamber up the mound and whisper to the others and begin to collect the tools and put on the heavy ammunition boots and the G.I. jackets bought in the second-hand clothes markets—by the time the cry of *Kar Khalas* floated over from Mound A, they were off like shots from a gun. None of them had a watch. How did they know when there were only five minutes to go? It was only when I walked slightly out of my usual path one day, passing a small cairn of stones, that I discovered. The men had built a small sundial, adjusting it daily when the time check came, and one of their number kept a watch as the shadow moved round to fall on a white stone a few inches away.

The originator of this bright idea was my current master shoveller, Abdul Kayoum, a slant-eyed rogue with a heavy growth of beard and a patched and ragged *chupan*. One day, resting full length on the ground while the pickmen were preparing the next section of the site, Abdul extended both arms and then, with a twinkle in his eye, told me that he had two wives.

"One is for fetching water, and one is for cooking food," he explained mischievously—"one is for this arm and one for the other. Now I want one more, to lie here," and he slapped his chest to the accompaniment of a bellow of laughter from the rest of the gang.

If ever I saw a group of men in a huddle, I could be sure that Abdul Kayoum was somewhere in the middle, telling a story. Equally, when our spirits were most depressed by weather and monotonous digging, Abdul would crack a joke and bring a smile to the most surly face. Two of his front teeth were missing, which gave him an incongruous lisp. Odd that when I had first seen Abdul, two years back, I had thought him a sinister character! There was nobody less sinister, and despite his jokes, nobody who worked as hard when his turn came round.

Unfortunately just when we needed his experience and strong arms most urgently, he twisted his back while shovelling the loosened earth from the bottom of the pit to the top, in an effort—his own idea—to cut down the number of *tukri wallahs*. After each spell of shovelling, he would lie on his stomach by the side of the site while a couple of companions massaged his back solicitously and the small water-carrier trampled up and down his spine, barefoot, much as though he was treading grapes in Italy, to the accompaniment of grunts and groans from the patient. Next day Abdul's back was even worse and his usually good-humoured, long face more gloomy and elongated than ever. It was obviously impossible for him to bend his back and we had to find another shoveller, not nearly so good. Abdul gamely struggled on working as best he could, carrying the bowls laden with earth even though he had to do a knees bend with back ramrod straight, to pick the bowls from the ground.

On Mound A Jacques had decided that Ginette's house with the mysterious pillar in the centre had actually been built on two levels on the steep slope, a thick layer of ashes covering one of these. The ashes were removed. Below them Ebrahim, who had now taken over from Ginette, found the upper level of a house with five roof beams, or rather, their charcoal remains, still set in place in the walls. For the first time we would have a house complete but for the roof. Now we would be able to see just how these ancient houses were constructed. Jacques, the architect, was spellbound. His ragged hat on the back of his head, his bright eyes darting from his own site (for he was doing a double job) to Ebrahim's, every spare moment found him surveying the "new" house with eager anticipation.

Every evening when we finished work, we would all gather round the house, anxious to see the latest progress.

One day Ebrahim announced that he had found the floor. True enough, there was an undoubtedly genuine floor, complete with square hearth in the middle, but it was less than five feet from the roof beams! Either our Mundigak dwellers had been midgets or at this period they chose to live in houses far too low for them to stand upright. So after all, Ginette's mysterious pillar could have been a support for the roof—except that the top of it was smooth and worn, as though it had been used as a table.

Jacqueline was still finding graves—hitting a lucky spell, she had found more necklaces and bracelets of the tiny blue, red, white, amber and grey beads. Most days Jacques would visit my site hopefully, to inquire if we could identify our buildings. "This should be the fourth point in my plan of the ramparts," he explained. "It should be here—according to my plan, it *must* be here," and his torn, half-eaten straw hat would be pushed to the back of his head as he joined us in puzzling over this unprofitable construction.

One evening, only a few moments before we were due to finish for the day, first one then another enormous stone appeared from the sand at the far, eastern, end of my mound. It looked as though we had indeed found the ramparts. These huge, shaped stone foundations beneath sun-dried brick walls, were the same as on Mound B. If only we could get high up and look down on Mound G maybe we could make some sense of the network of cells and walls—this is where an aerial photo would have been of such value and where Jacques' final plans would perhaps open our eyes to some now-hidden significance. So far, all we could see were rooms that, being on the slope of a hill, had been filled with rubble, old bricks, etc., to provide fresh foundations for something that might have been started but never was finished, and had succeeded only in confusing the original picture for us.

We had reached the stage where there were always three or four teams of men working on Mound G, yet even with Jean-Marie's help, there were not nearly enough skilled men to trace walls, floors and doors. Each time the picks dug into fresh soil, someone had to be standing there to make sure they were not going through some such feature. Each time the soil was shovelled away, someone had to watch, to be on hand if the workmen felt a change in the consistency of the soil. Before the next layer of soil was loosened by picks, someone had to examine carefully to search for floorings, stairs, hearths and so on. We had only Bismullah (who was working with Ebrahim over on Mound A), Akram and Ramazan, who were really reliable at this job—trainees were coming on but were apt to make mistakes, as indeed we all were. It meant that besides supervising several gangs I had to start tracing walls myself so that work should not be held up.

There was nothing to beat the thrill of noticing the first small crack filled with loosened soil that betrayed a doorway. One had to decide on which side of this crack was the face of the wall, then scrape and brush and even blow away the soil until the full glory of red or white paint was revealed. Sometimes, in spite of our best efforts, it would prove to be the back of a wall, or rather, the back of the plaster, that we started to reveal—a fair amount of guesswork came in and our puzzling prehistoric dwellers here had really not played the game when they kept altering, rebuilding and using old materials in fresh constructions, so that we would puzzle over a strange architectural feature with paint in some improbable place, only to find later that it was part of an early wall used to make a new staircase.

On Mound A more houses complete but for the actual roofs were being uncovered at the lowest levels of the mound. In house after house, bordering twisting lanes, small squares and streets, we would be finding small, properly built holes at ground level. "Cat doors," Ginette called them, thinking of the small doorways, very similar, built into the walls of houses in Kandahar, specially for the use of the household cat.

One afternoon Ginette found a "cat door" shielded on the road by a brick screen, built a few inches from the wall. Light and air could seep in round the sides and top of the screen, but dust was kept out and nobody could get a direct view inside from the street. Other screened "cat doors" appeared in the outer walls of houses so that it began to look as though the inhabitants of these houses, living and working indoors without chairs and tables as we know them, in fact, like present-day Afghan villagers, reclining on rugs on the floor, had made their windows too at ground level. This was particularly noticeable in one house which contained a long room with two hearths in the floor and a mass of pottery figurines of dogs, bulls and human beings scattered on the floor. A low mud bench ran round the inner walls and a small trough of mud-pisé had been built just inside the doorway. Had this been the workshop-home of the local toy maker?

In one of the squares, a second, deep, brick-lined well had been found—Bismullah had been let down to scoop out the filling soil and had reached a depth of thirty feet before the well was refilled as a safety measure. On fine evenings—and we did have *some* good weather—when the sky was filled with a froth of amber-gold clouds, and the face of Mound A was painted with a glory of peach-glow for three minutes before the sun sank in the western gap, I would wander up to the mound and standing on the top look down on the twisting lanes that were so reminiscent of the villages all around us.

I would walk down the steep slope and through a doorway into one of the oldest of Mundigak's houses. Here, peering through the unscreened windows, I could look out through a narrow slit on to the square with the well. Five thousand years ago, did a young Mundigak blade peep through here at the girls round the well, dawdling with water pots, gossiping, and well aware of the hidden, admiring masculine eyes? It was easy to see the pattern of the two main mounds, to follow the ramparts and to trace the burials at the foot of the mounds. But what, in heaven's name, could have been the purpose of Mound G where we still had found not one single trace of occupation—hearths, yes, but no potsherds, no evidence that human beings actually lived there?

We just went on removing ton after ton of earth, revealing more and more walls and rooms, digging deeper in the "cells" to find that originally two cells had been one large room, that under cross walls, heavy, wider walls ran at slightly different angles. We began to look on the whole mound as a huge public building, maybe a block of apartments or an hotel surrounded by wide streets and main squares. A flight of wide, shallow triangular stairs led from the upper levels of the main walls, to one of these squares, which we had at first supposed to be a room. The room now appeared to have been built over the square and part of what, for lack of a better name, we called the "altar". This was a raised dais of mud-brick built over charcoal ashes and burnt, flat hearth-stones. The dais was painted red; two walls that flanked the north and east sides were covered with thick white paint, the eastern wall being the wide main hall of the site. Along the length of the slightly narrower, northern wall that ran right across the brow of the mound were no fewer than five red-painted doorways, all at regular intervals—in fact, having found the first two, I thought of measuring the distance between them, measured off the same distance farther along and sure enough, there, not apparent before, were the tell-tale signs of other doors.

"Maybe it was a tax collector's office," suggested Jacques, surveying the long row of doors.

"I think it was the Post Office," said Jacqueline.

"It was a bazaar—see, every cell is a little shop," added Ramazan.

It was now quite obvious that however hard we worked, however kind the weather to us, we could never finish this site by the end of the season. This was no small bastion, it was a regular village.

* * * *

Meanwhile kitten Number One was troubled by no problems of where and how and why. He just went on thriving, growing more cheeky, more self-confident, and bullying the other kittens in spite of his smaller size. The little marmalade-coloured kitten, still thin, his little white front paws slightly bowed, strutted around, growling and muttering to himself, while the other two kittens were content to stay in the safe shelter of the camp. Number One chased the small black and white wagtails that bounced over the dig, he would inspect Jacqueline's bones with curiosity, explore the Casals' hut and follow me a little way across the site to my own distant mound, but always he managed to run straight to the mess at mealtimes.

My site was approached by going over part of Mound A, then down into a hollow, across the normally dry bed of a stream, and up another hill. One day I was lying flat on my face, scraping at a hearth, when cries of "*Khanum Sahib, pishak ast!*"—"here comes pussy,"—sent me scrabbling for the surface.

A small golden ball of fluff appeared in the stony landscape, approaching the site with rugged determination, disappearing in the hollows, reappearing on the hilltops, tail flying straight as a banner. Finally, struggling to the edge of the dig, Number One ran to my side, purring delightedly.

The men were enchanted—they were also incredulous at the sight of his green and grey knitted pullover, contrived from scraps of wool given me by Ginette and Jacqueline who had insisted on my knitting a jacket for Number One, who suffered from the cold.

Front paws protruding through the green sleeves, small head through the polo-neck, Number One stepped out in all his glory, the envy of Cook who kept begging for a similar garment for Number Three.

The pullover was intended only for really cold days when we had no stove burning during the daytime; because then Number One would sit shivering and miserable on the doorstep. On such a day, Number One was wearing his pullover and we were all seated round the mess table for lunch—One and Two were outside, walking sedately towards the mess when bedlam assailed our ears. The dogs barked fiercely, the kittens flew inside in a panic, leaping to the table for safety, followed closely by a cockerel, new to the camp. The cockerel flapped its wings in agitation and scrambled to the wooden bench beside me, puffing out its feathers in distress, the two dogs, cause of all the trouble, bounced in yelping with delight, to sit with paws on the benches, liquid eyes following every mouthful of food we lifted to our lips, and just to complete the scene of domestic democracy, the water-carrier's donkey stepped delicately into the doorway, a small brown kid at its heels and Bismullah's ancient, grey-muzzled veteran hound sniffing timidly on the outskirts.

Solemnly Jacques took a notebook from the pocket of his jeans, scribbled something on a fresh page, tore it out and walked to the door. A tool chest always stood there and he picked out a hammer and nails. When he had finished he turned with a grave expression.

"Now it is necessary to behave well," he chided us and we looked to see what he had written.

"L'ARCHE DE NOÉ"

It was a quip the workmen could appreciate for Noah and the Flood are part of their own traditions.

And "Noah's Ark" we remained after that.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# *Reunion in Sheerga*

FROM TIME TO time I had been making odd snatches of tape recordings in Mundigak—the thin, high-pitched voice of Mullah Rapoor calling the faithful to prayer within the potsherd-outlined *masjid* below the camp: the shouts of the donkey boys and the raucous songs of the men working on Mound A; Khairullah and Abdullah Jan singing together outside the mess (Khairullah had a singularly sweet, high voice and sang the notes with truth). Toothless old Malang playing the *nal* and apologizing for his bad performance—"but I have not enough teeth," he had explained.

I had tried to record the animated discussions of the team speculating about the "Maccabees" and my "*ziggurat*" but that had been frustrated by the fact that I could not leave my battery-operated machine running for more than ten minutes at a time, even if I had had unlimited supplies of tapes, which I had not. Jean-Marie and Jacques were too astute not to notice the machine, even when I tried hiding it beneath the table. All I managed to do was to get Number One's plaintive "Miaow" as Jean-Marie persuaded the kitten to speak, and a lustier "Woof, Woof" from Bruno before he left, together with a little conversation over a game of Scrabble which I had introduced to the team, the English version—and over everything, the loud, insistent hiss of the pressure lamp.

Incidentally, have you ever tried playing Scrabble in French with letters selected for English speakers? The proportion of vowels and consonants is completely different but even so, Jacques and Jean-Marie made out with success, Ginette and I with ignominy.

If my tape recordings in the mess were disappointing, the workmen proved to be a never-tiring source of performers and gratifying listeners to the playbacks.

I wanted very much to record Sirdar singing a song that he had taught me in my first season and that kept running through my mind when I was away from Afghanistan. It always reminded me of the days at Mundigak. But up to this time Sirdar had been working on Mound A and I had scarcely even seen him. Moreover, it was impossible to record during weekdays because as soon as work was over, when the sun began to sink behind the mountains, everyone naturally rushed off home. So it had to be arranged for a *Juma*, and one Friday morning, Sirdar loped into camp with a look of somewhat apprehensive expectancy on his black-browed features. He had heard of, but not seen, my famous tape recorder, which the men called a "radio", spinning their fingers round to imitate the moving spools. The expression on Khairullah's face when he had first heard his own voice played back had been one of delighted disbelief, certainly sufficient compensation for the trouble of feather-cushioning the battery-operated set all the way to Afghanistan. Now Sirdar was to see this miracle for himself. Settling diffidently on the mud-brick bench outside the mess, he assumed a blasé expression of bored indifference. Obviously he was determined not to be impressed, particularly since he was not the first to be shown this new toy.

I set the tapes, adjusted the volume and urged Sirdar to start. A remarkable change swept over the would-be man of the world. Instead of his usual lusty, self-assured song, a few croaking apologetic notes emerged as he sat crimson-faced with embarrassment. The golden cockerel pecked diligently at a husk of corn-on-the-cob, a hawk circled low overhead, quartering the ground with diligent, searching eyes. Sirdar's voice trailed off completely and I stopped the machine.

Like a temperamental prima donna he clutched desperately at his throat while gazing at me with pleading green eyes.

"Today my voice is weak, *Khanum Sahib*, today my throat is hurting," and he coughed energetically to emphasize the point. He made another attempt, forgot the words, blushed again and went back to the beginning. Finally he confessed that he would have to wait until another day when he was feeling stronger.

I agreed, but all the same I got out the ciné camera and set the machine to play back. It was a portable tape recorder and had no normal facilities for playback except through earphones, but I had had a small amplifier built into the metal case adapted to carry recorder, mikes, spare batteries. The reproduction was certainly loud enough, even though it lacked the quality of a standard playback. It had this advantage—it encouraged my artist to greater efforts—the drawback was that until I could play back my tapes in a studio, I could never be sure of the quality.

For Sirdar the effect of hearing his coughs and splutters was startling. The look of complacent boredom was wiped off his face and with a slight, self-conscious smile he began to accompany his own voice, frowning, giggling and gasping as he heard his recorded mistakes.

I had promised to visit his home that afternoon, and as soon as lunch was finished and cook and Khair Mahmad had cleared away the dishes, Mad Amin got out the truck and mysteriously, as if from outer space (they had certainly not been visible earlier), a dozen men from my gang, including all the "Mouse" brothers and Mashuk, materialized. With much noise and confusion we piled into the truck. Everyone else in the team was busy about the camp; these visits to the homes of the men who worked with us were to me the most fascinating way of spending my leisure time in Afghanistan, but nobody else seemed to be particularly interested.

It was a gay party that bumped across the hills to Sheerga to leave the truck on the outskirts of the dusty village amid a gaggle of goggle-eyed small boys and girls. Instead of making straight for Sirdar's home, to my surprise Mashuk hustled us into a large courtyard near the truck, grinning triumphantly as Sirdar's black brows met across his nose.

"Come in, come in—we are so close you must come and see my mother," urged Mashuk.

I stopped in my tracks.

"Your *mother*?"

"Yes, yes, my mother, and my sisters. . . ."

Too late Mashuk realized that he had given himself away. How many times last season had he not told me that he was an orphan, without mother or sisters! He grinned ruefully and rushed ahead into the small patio surrounded by outbuildings, kitchens—roofed over with rushes—and the low mud-pisé living quarters. Three donkeys munched away under the shade of a mud-brick wall—Mashuk's small brother used them to fetch water for the camp, an easier and more profitable job than carrying earth from the excavations. Three bullocks meandered around pecking at titbits hidden on stony crevasses and a large, off-white dog growled from a corner without lifting its head.

Ebrahim explained that Mashuk had already arranged for us to eat with him.

"But I promised long ago to eat with Sirdar," I protested.

"No, no—first you must come into Mashuk's house—at least take something," said Ebrahim urging me inside a low doorway to a large room with shelves full of mysterious packages wrapped in cloth, a pile of brightly-coloured *rezai* quilts on the mud floor and heaps of freshly-gathered corn in the corner, filling the air with a fragrant, harvest aroma. This was grain that Mashuk's brother was to take to the Hazara country on the backs of his donkeys, a long and hazardous trip but a profitable one.

By the time we had all squashed inside, the room looked and felt very small and the two small girls who stepped over our legs to squeeze into the corners folded themselves into the smallest possible space. All the time, as a monotonous background noise, Sirdar was grumbling about the food his mother had been preparing and even though I seemed to have been trapped, I began to feel more and more guilty.

An ancient woman in rusty black garments was brewing tea in a huge black, three-legged cauldron under the rush-covered trellis at the other side of the yard. Mashuk beckoned to me from the open door and I struggled to my feet to follow him across the courtyard. The other men were careful to turn their heads and remain inside the room.

"This is my mother," announced Mashuk.

The old woman smiled a toothless smile as she eyed me up and down curiously. I was wearing worn blue jeans and a sleeveless blouse, having decided that after all these years the men must have got used to the sight of bare arms. I need not have worried about Mashuk's mother—she had come to the conclusion that I was neither man nor woman but some strange, sexless creature bred in distant lands and no potential danger to her or her daughters.

There was a buzz of noise from the villagers gathered outside the wall and in the next door courtyard I glimpsed a white-clad figure half-hidden in the leafy branches of a pomegranate tree. I turned to Mashuk.

"We will have tea—but no meat, you know very well I have promised Sirdar to take meat with him," I scolded gently, unwilling to hurt his feelings.

He knew he was in the wrong, the rascal, and hurriedly he agreed, explaining hastily to his mother and I felt sure I detected a look of relief on her face, for meat would have to be provided for all dozen of us, and not for me alone.

I went back to take my place in the living-sleeping-dining room, and Mashuk appeared, accompanied by the small girls bearing trays of green tea and a wooden platter of pale, elongated green grapes. We ate the sweet grapes from which the Italians in Kandahar made their white wine, and washed them down with draughts of pale-green tea before we finally gave way to Sirdar's restless impatience and picked our way across the courtyard to continue in procession down the narrow, twisting lanes of Sheerga.

As I followed Sirdar, now cheerful and hastening towards his home, I recalled the surprise he had given me a few days earlier when he had brought me a *baksheesh* of a chicken. Such *baksheesh* is an everyday affair and normally means no more than a face-saving device for the donor who wants to sell a chicken to the camp commissariat. The accepted procedure is to thank the giver and tell him to see the cook or Jacques, who then settles the price of the fowl, usually after a bit of haggling. I had therefore thanked Sirdar with the proper amount of sincerity and recommended him to see Jacques. For three days Jacques had attempted to pay Sirdar for his chicken, and for three days Sirdar had obstinately refused to accept payment. He had not only refused, he had put on a very convincing air of being thoroughly insulted. We were all bewildered. "It is *baksheesh* for

Sylvia *Khanum*," he had protested. Only yesterday, pay-day, Jacques had added an extra fifteen Afghanis to his wages and an outraged Sirdar had flung the money to the ground, his face suffused with anger. Someone had picked up the notes and stuffed them into Sirdar's pocket, but this morning, when he had come to make the tape recording, he had pulled out the dirty, crumpled notes and tried to give them to me, saying that the chicken was a gift from his mother.

It was a situation without parallel. Jacques had shaken his head in bewilderment. "Always they say this is *baksheesh*, but if you do not pay them at once, they keep reminding you and asking for payment. But this—it seems that Sirdar is really sincere—how very strange!"

Unfortunately I had not accepted Sirdar's money that morning, wishing to keep out of these financial dealings and telling him to settle it with Jacques. Now I began to regret my action, especially as Sirdar took the opportunity of telling me once again how cross his mother was with me. I noticed that we were taking a different route from the last time I had visited Sirdar's home. The family had moved and it was quite plain that they had prospered these last eighteen months. The courtyard was three times as large as the one round Mashuk's house and the walls were twice as high. All along the right-hand side was a series of covered shelters under which a group of plump, white, fat-tailed sheep was gazing thoughtfully at the wall. To my left was a small one-storeyed house, the windows and doors screened with reed mats. In an angle between this house and a long, whitewashed building to the rear, a wood fire was burning beneath the usual black cauldron suspended from a tripod.

By the far wall a reed screen formed a little summer house inside which a wooden bench and nails in the wall provided stands and hooks for pottery and leather water vessels; a reed mat on top screened the heat of the sun's rays. The scene was very tranquil and almost prosperous. The inevitable old woman in black was stirring something with a delicious, savoury aroma in the black cauldron and as she looked up I recognized Sirdar's mother who had baked the round, sweet loaves of bread for me on my last visit. She frowned, then she smiled and motioned me to the doorway of the long building.

A white-haired old man, Sirdar's father, greeted me with a warm clasp of my hand between both of his and led me to a pile of *rezais* on the floor. Here and there in the thick mud-pisé walls, small windows had been pierced to allow slanting shafts of sunlight to pierce the gloom and form geometrical patterns amid dancing, golden specks of dust. A pile of softest white sheep's wool was heaped in one corner; discarded bottles from the Mundigak camp hung from nails in the walls; mud shelves were stacked with precious oddments—old *tukris*, broken lamps, booty from successive seasons of work on the dig. A round mud hearth in the middle of the room was edged with a dried mud rim, just like those on the prehistoric site. It was empty of ashes now, for the weather was still warm enough to allow the family to cook outside. On the wall opposite me, hung two home-made guns, one of them in a cloth cover. Seeing my admiring glances, Sirdar hastily took them down to display them with pride.

Overhead, bunches of pale-green grapes swung from the roof beams. There was a comforting, friendly atmosphere about the place and a surprisingly plump, orange-coloured cat stalked through the doorway to settle on the pile of wool and stare at us with solemn amber eyes.

Sirdar meanwhile was bustling about the place like a clucking hen rounding up her chicks. He arranged us in a circle round the empty hearth and snapped orders at half a dozen small girls in red dresses whose veils were dragging in the dust. Amid scurrying and organizing, Sirdar found time to load one of the guns and instruct his ancient father to fire it into the sky from the courtyard. A cloud of white pigeons fluttered into the air and startled faces peeped in at the gateway. Then while the long-awaited meal was being dished up, I filmed the family—all but the women-folk of course.

Oh, but that meal! I had been prepared to take a mouthful just out of politeness; in fact I had to restrain my appetite for the same reason. A tin dish was placed in front of me, curried meat floating in thick, savoury gravy. A larger tray of meat was set before the half-dozen men who had crowded into the long room—it seemed I had been honoured with the most succulent portions and using pieces of the flat, *nan* bread, I soaked up gravy and meat together.

Until I tasted the meat I had not realized just how hungry I was. Lunch at the camp had been the favourite "gigot" cooked "*à point*" (which meant barely fifteen or twenty minutes in the wood oven) and stuffed so full of whole cloves of garlic that one could scarcely put a pin between them. Fond though I was of the flavour of garlic, the very whiff of it now made me retch and I never had acquired the sophisticated taste for raw meat that was in any case so tough that one needed all one's strength to hack it to pieces. My portions invariably went surreptitiously under the table to the dogs. I hated to appear too finicky about food—as it was, I was known to find brains and tongue inedible, so I tried to fill up with bread and other staple foods.

Here at Sheerga the meat in my mouth melted like a dream, succulent, tender, and full of flavoursome juices. As I showed my appreciation, Akbar Mahmad the camp cook, laughed. He too found the French way of cooking strange. "It never is cooked, always it is raw," he explained to the wondering audience around him. "I too cannot eat it," he sympathized—I was torn between apologizing and gobbling the food so deliciously prepared by Sirdar's mother. There was no doubt about it, stewing the meat for several hours as was the Afghan custom certainly made it much tastier, at least, to my palate.

Because she was so old and because she already knew all the menfolk gathered in the hut, Sirdar's mother now joined us—not, of course to eat, that would never do—but to receive the deserved praise for her cooking and also to chide me just a little, for the incident of the chicken *baksheesh*. Then I had to go with her to meet the younger women—Sirdar's grown-up sisters, now married and giggling and peeping eagerly from the windows of the small house at the entrance to the yard.

"See." A pretty girl with yellow-patterned tunic and blue veil, unusual colour schemes here, held out a necklace to me. "You remember you gave me this when you came before—two years ago?"

The others brought out scarves, earrings and handkerchiefs I had distributed on that first visit and chatted eagerly, showing me their offspring now growing up, fingering my blouse and jeans, pulling me indoors, uging me to take tea, to stay to talk and tell them about my own marriage. But Ebrahim and the camp servants were anxious to go on to Shah Maqsud to pray, so I had to promise to go back later, and content myself with distributing the sweets and oddments I had brought from Quetta for the children.

I had not brought the tape recorder with me on this trip but both Mashuk and Sirdar were anxious for their families to see this wonder; I in turn was anxious to record some of the music played locally—the best musicians were mullahs, so they told me, important people who naturally would not come to the camp for this purpose but who would have to be invited to a proper party in Sheerga itself. So it came about that Ramazan, the young, discarded Hazara friend of Akram, offered to make all the arrangements for me. We—that is all of the team—would go to Sheerga the very next Friday, and have a picnic lunch with Ramazan in the garden of his home. This was an orchard and we would recline on rugs under the fruit trees and pick pomegranates as we wished, he assured us—a tempting picture and one we all looked forward to.

Accordingly, the next *Juma*, after we had done the usual Friday chores of washing and mending, we gathered picnic baskets with hard-boiled eggs and tins of meat, cameras, rugs, tape recorder and books, and piled into the truck and the station wagon. Ginette rushed back to the cabin for her knitting. At that moment the sound of a car on the track from Kandahar was heard, and into view came a Landrover with a party of Americans from the M-K Company.

Standing in the back of our truck, Sirdar, Mashuk and the other stalwarts were already clinging to the sides, ready for the journey, but visitors came so rarely to Mundigak, that one could do nothing but unpack and pretend that nothing had been farther from our minds than leaving camp that day! It was a disgruntled little party of Afghans that finally set off for Sheerga to give the waiting Ramazan the message that we would not be coming, and meanwhile cook bustled round opening tins and combining these with the gifts of American cookies and instant coffee to make a meal for the whole party.

Despite our most profuse apologies to Ramazan, we were never allowed to forget our failure to turn up at Sheerga. As the days went by he—and everyone else who attended the picnic—would elaborate on the quantity and quality of the food that had been provided, on the fine musicians, and the delights of lounging in the orchard under the cool fruit trees.

Unfortunately, we never did have the chance of repeating the picnic, for that very night it began to rain and from then until the end of the season the ground never had a chance to dry out sufficiently to be sat on; the fruit rotted on the trees, the harvests were ruined.

I woke that night to the unusual sound of heavy rain pounding on the flat roof, and presently a stream of water began to ooze under the wooden doorway and form a river on the floor; the walls streamed and the rain seeped through the window on to the table where were my books and papers—though the warmest, mine was also the oldest and least rainproof of the camp huts.

The rain penetrated into the mess hut too, so that the great central beam in its mud-pisé setting was weakened. It was a matter for old Shireen our master builder to repair as soon as the weather cleared; meanwhile, blessing my husband for sending my ski boots, I donned waterproof overpants and anorak and trudged through the thick, sticky mud to Mound G. At the edge of the dig I paused in dismay. The excavations, yards deep, were lakes of muddy water, the mud-brick walls soft as fresh putty. As the men with me stood staring down at the scene of devastation, Bust and Whisky, chasing each other with carefree excitement, bounded exuberantly on to the walls and down into the waterlogged rooms in a shower of muddy splashes.

By the time we had managed to chase the animals out of the site, doggy pawmarks had appeared all over the dig, lumps had fallen out of walls, and the once neat site now looked as though a herd of elephants had played hide and seek among the walls.

It was hopeless to attempt to work on the existing excavations until they dried out; we were already counting on every hour of work in an effort to finish by the end of the year, but there was nothing for it but to try an extension. Since we already knew the type of construction we would find on the surface, we had to sacrifice the top layers to get down to something fairly dry. But the rain persisted. At first it was no more than a penetrating drizzle, then it would clear for an hour and suddenly, just as we were congratulating ourselves and estimating how soon we could start work again on the main dig, the heavens would open and send us running madly for shelter in the lee of a wall.

Quickly the hitherto dry gullies turned to fast-flowing streams, and the area round the camp into a morass of squelchy mud. Jacqueline abandoned her cemetery and sat indoors mending pots and figurines; Jacques drew his plans in the mess and Jean-Marie and Ginette wrote up their notes. There was nothing I could do except to stare in exasperation at the relentless and unseasonable rain and to think dark thoughts about the makers of my so-called waterproof trousers and jacket, neither of which was capable of keeping out the rain.

Days passed in which occasionally we could do a little work, hampered in between by rain and heavy cloud that descended right over the camp, blotting out objects as effectively as any London fog.

The strange feature on Mound G with its red paint and burnt stones and mud-brick dais, which promised to be some kind of "altar", was completely abandoned—it was permanently like butter in consistency now. The once-thick white paint fell in lumps from the walls, the trenches swam in reddish seas. When I did try to work on some new area of the dig, it was with constant nips at a Thermos of hot Bovril to keep out the bitter chill that penetrated every bone in my body. The men were miserable even in their heavy felt overcoats; they huddled together with long faces which matched those of their dripping wet donkeys standing with their backs to the wind.

One morning we even experienced hail; if the stones were not as large as pigeons' eggs, they certainly felt like them as they bounced on our shoulders and into the dig. Mine was the only site where we could make even an attempt at work, and at sight of the hail, Khairullah came to the rescue from the camp, bearing the enormous golf umbrella over his shoulder. I had often longed for the shelter of the striped canvas in sunshine, but it could never have been more welcome than now. Stabbed into the side of the dig it provided some shelter for half a dozen of us who huddled beneath it while drips fell down our necks and a vista of grey, mournful sky and landscape spread before us.

How I longed for the hot sunshine of my home in Baluchistan!

It was at this stage, when our spirits were lowest of all, that Mashuk arrived in camp one morning bearing what he described as a *Nawakee*. I was intrigued enough to photograph the crude, grubby-looking doll made of dried apricots strung together with pieces of coloured cloth for its eyes. The *Nawakee* was a present to the mess and cook hung it on a nail in the wall, just inside the mess door. Ginette took one look at the object, then, blue eyes flashing, pulled it down.

"*C'est dégoutant!*" she grimaced. "Absolutely disgusting. Please throw it away at once or the mice will be eating it!"

Hastily I retrieved the doll from its fate, and packing it up in a Polythene bag, stored it away in my baggage to be sent to London's Horniman Museum at the first opportunity.

Just about this time I plunged an arm to the bottom of my deep leather, camera bag, bought in Kabul two years back, to find an extremely dirty but fetchingly-embroidered cloth adorned with purple camels, pink-and-white-striped donkeys, orange cockerels, flowers and birds of odd design. I thought I recognized the style from a previous gift, and sure enough it had been made, allegedly specially for me by Amanullah the "Mouse's" mother. Judging from the worn and stained appearance of the cloth, this had been made long before I was even contemplating coming here. The design was unique, so I accepted it gratefully enough. The colours ran when I washed it—Afghan materials, or rather, those obtainable in Afghanistan, are so poor that the cloth always rots and the dyes are seldom if ever fast. Ginette, as intrigued as I was by the patterns on the cloth, borrowed it from me to have copied in her own materials in Kabul.

This initial gift seemed to set a fashion, for I was overwhelmed with tablecloths, scarves and handkerchiefs, including one enormous cloth embroidered by Mashuk's sister and apparently quite new. But not one could match the imaginative creation of Amanullah's mother.

Madrazar, my Kuchhi workman with the full, bushy beard, long bobbed hair in contrast to the villagers' shaven skulls, and his patched and worn smocked shirt and trousers, would bring me sticky pink and green sweets. Poor Madrazar, he fared worse than anyone else when the rain set in really solidly. He had already moved his sprawling black-felt tent from the sheltered dip between two mounds to a more exposed but less watery area; in spite of this everything he possessed was wringing wet—sheep, goats, clothing, bedding—all of course, huddled in the tent and all soaking. Little Malaghai, his three year old son, was soon a victim of the damp and cold, running a high fever as he tossed in the tent that was now a mere mass of pungent, soaking goats'-hair.

The villagers were slightly better off, for their huts were perhaps more sheltered within their mud-pisé walls; even so, they were usually in a worse state of repair than ours in the camp, so that these days we all wore a gloomy air of deepest depression.

Small shepherd boys in their patched but showerproof white-felt cloaks tried in vain to keep their flocks from finding refuge in the deep excavations and only too often I would be surveying the dreary scene from the top of Mound A when a herd of nimble goats leaped wildly over our treacherously soft walls; pursuing guard dogs urged on by the cries and yells of their small master did not help at all. Before long the dig began to look like a battleground.

At this stage, there were a few days when the rain ceased and in these mercifully dry interludes the men would fashion a make-shift *chilum* or pipe after the style of the Bugti tribesmen in Baluchistan—not quite as efficient though. They would dig or poke a small hole in the ground, using a sharp stick, and connect the hole with a second a few inches away, pushed through the soil with a long finger. A few shreds of carefully hoarded tobacco would be dropped into the first hole; into the second a straw would be inserted while damp earth was packed round it, then slowly the straw would be withdrawn. Next the tobacco would be lit and covered with the end of a turban; the smoker, lying full length on the ground, would put his lips to the second hole and suck vigorously—each man taking a turn at the pipe and apparently finding it utterly delectable in spite of the mouthfuls of sand and soil. In Baluchistan the hole containing the tobacco would be almost covered with mud and the smoker would fill his mouth with water before drawing on the pipe, spitting out the water when he had finished inhaling.

* * * *

When the rain stopped, Jacqueline would sit in the doorway of the *Villa Dumarçay* knitting a thick green sweater for Jacques who was off every evening, rain or not, hunting pigeon for our supper. This year Cook's ingenuity turned the somewhat scarce bag of pigeon into a variety of tempting dishes—vol-au-vent, pigeon pie, grilled pigeon, stewed pigeon—there seemed no end to his inventiveness.

In the evenings we played Scrabble, listened to the scratchy gramophone, watched the kittens playing round the curtains, growing both in daring and confidence, and swopped anecdotes. One evening when we had again been pondering on the subject of Jacqueline's skeletons and on the strange burial rites of our Mundigak ancients, Jacques related the story of an Indian friend living in Kabul who kept the ashes of his dead wife in a decorative jar on the mantelpiece of his bedroom. One day he had been entertaining a mixed party to lunch, and the lady visitors had gone to his room apparently only too literally to powder their noses.

"Why, fancy you keeping face powder for us!" exclaimed one lady delightedly as she rejoined the party. "And just the right shade, too, how clever of you!"

The poor man rushed to see his worst fears confirmed: half of his wife's ashes were now sacrificed to the adornment of his guests' faces! Jacques swore this story was absolutely true.

Despite all our attempts it was becoming more and more difficult to keep up morale in camp. Old Said Mohammed, a toothless and amiable octogenarian in a rusty black turban, sat day after day, washing countless potsherds; but as work ceased on the other sites and continued on mine with no signs of sherds, he took to wandering around to inspect the dig for himself. With his gappy-toothed smile and wonderful, uninhibited laughter, he was a general favourite as he came ambling purposefully over the hillside, shrewd, periwinkle-bright blue eyes sparkling in mock indignation at our lack of sherds.

"Nothing interesting from you yet," he would chide, "you are not looking—there is no work for me, why do you not find something for me to do?"

But on Mound G we no longer had baskets for sherds; to find a piece of broken pottery was an event so rare that any fragment was carried back to camp almost with ceremony.

There was a dark and moonless night when Ginette found a "serpent" in the toilet. Somehow "serpent" sounded much more dangerous than snake, and after this announcement, night excursions to the mud-walled enclosure took on the aspect of a major expedition, and were accomplished with an armoury of sticks and torches. The snake cunningly had taken up residence in a deep hole; short of a full-scale demolition, there seemed to be little we could do. Since the serpent was really very inoffensive and did no more than occasionally panic us into hasty retreat, it was allowed to remain undisturbed.

Baby scorpions, pale yellowish-green in colour, were breeding by the score this year and whole nests of baby spiders appeared in my site, none-the-less repulsive for Mashuk's explanation that they were very poisonous, even in babyhood!

Jean-Marie took to tramping the countryside looking for more outposts of the city, and his tall, stooping form could be seen far off on the horizon prodding the ground and scratching with his long-bladed knife.

"What do you call that, when *Char Mariz* is all black against the sky?" asked Sirdar one day, after staring intently at Jean-Marie's distant silhouette.

I told him.

After that the gang had a new name for Jean-Marie and whenever he was sighted, whether in outline or near by, it would provoke a cry of "Here comes Seelyewetta".

But for "Silhouette" as for the rest of us, the days were passing with a frustrating lack of progress—"never mind," we kept telling each other hopefully, "it simply can't last—it *must* improve soon!"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# *More Trouble at Mundigak*

THE WEATHER WAS atrocious but we were still plodding on slowly on Mound G. Soon it became obvious that the entire mound was artificial and the problem boiled down to the simple one of selecting just one section that we might reasonably expect to clear to its lowest level before the end of the season. Simple? Well—that's what I thought.

The soil had been so thoroughly soaked during the rains that we had in any case to abandon work on the south-western corner of the dig. So we decided to push farther north-east and try to find the limits of construction. The main walls continued to run from east to west, with their red-painted doorways appearing at regular intervals of one metre, sixty-five centimetres apart, until the whole top of the longest, exterior wall with its drop of some five or six metres to a wide courtyard on the northern side, looked like a crenellated battlement. If these had been shops, as Ramazan had suggested, they had suffered the same fate as the houses on Mound B and the temple-palace on Mound A. Many of them were deep in ashes. There was one long, narrow room however, with two red doorways into it, where I found myself brushing round a mud-brick hearth built between the two doors. This was the first hearth (apart from that on the "altar") that we had found, and at once our hopes of small finds rose. But although the hearth was genuine enough, there was no sign of the normal usage, no potsherds, no bowls, no bones at all. Presently, more fireplaces, all of them rectangular in shape, began to emerge from the soil, each with a circular hollow full of ashes—and every one of them as disappointingly barren as the first.

The whole of Mound G was stripped of its mantle of sand but the sight of a maze of walls of differing widths and periods, of rooms and courtyards leading one from another, of hearths and stairs and drainage pipes and doorways, became no easier to understand as time went on. One large room that on the upper levels had been two small ones, featured a three-foot high, square pillar in the centre. In the room adjoining this a fine terracotta drain emptied itself into a narrow lane that proved to be a dividing line between the one solid block of dwellings and what appeared to be an earlier fortified post built on a different orientation—could it be Jacques' longed-for bastion?

Everyone was working at feverish pitch to reveal as much as possible and the long leisurely days of the beginning of the season on Mound H were no more than a memory—days when I had time to film Wali the shepherd boy and his golden watchdog and visiting villagers on gay-tasselled donkeys, Mashuk holding my camera-case to one eye and turning an imaginary handle in realistic imitation of my own ciné-photography.

There came a day when Abdul Kayoum, who was still hobbling around with a strained back, suddenly leapt into the air with a loud scream and an entirely unexpected turn of agility.

"*Laram! Laram!*" he called wildly, tearing at his shirt, and as though an alarm bell had sounded, everyone dropped whatever they were carrying and rushed to the rescue.

"*Laram,*" as I soon found out, meant "scorpion", and poor Abdul had been nourishing one all uninvited on his back. What with his own contortions and the efforts of his friends, the wretched scorpion was frightened away, but not before it had bent that vicious tail over its body to sting Abdul on his bare flesh.

In a moment the shirt was ripped off and Abdul placed face downwards on the ground, while volunteers sucked out the poison.

Only the next day, while Abdul was still pulling a long face and rubbing his back ruefully, a small, whippy snake very like a banded krait struck at another of the men on the dig, missing him by a fraction of an inch. At once the man, who had been one of the first to suck at Abdul's wound, caught the long, silver grey snake in one hand and with a gay, carefree air, prodded and teased until it darted its fangs viciously into his wrist. The rest of the men drew away fearfully, but Mahmad laughed and fondled the snake with affection. Fascinated as I had always been by snakes, I had put out a hand to take it from him, feeling the cool, clean rasp of the silvery skin. But Mahmad snatched it away hurriedly.

"No, no, for you it is very dangerous, for you it will kill," he shouted. "For me, no! I can hold it because I am a Shagal, a Margir, one who has power over snakes. But for you and for the others, it will kill!"

He seemed so positive that I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt—the snake serum was a good ten minutes' walk away to the camp and by that time, if the snake was really lethal as he said, I would be too dead to prove my courage.

Still only half-believing, I watched Mahmad curl the snake up and tuck it into a small box which he then tied carefully in the end of his turban.

"It will be useful for me at home," he explained cryptically.

A little later I noticed a huddle of men around him as he sat on the ground. The snake was out of its box and he was prodding and teasing it once more. Then, taking a needle and a long piece of dirty, white cotton from a hiding place in the lapel of his green waistcoat, Mahmad picked up the snake in one hand and proceeded to sew up its lips with rough, crude stitches.

The snake wriggled madly but Mahmad held it firmly in his hand and went on sewing. Horrified I protested. "Why don't you kill it? Don't torture it, don't hurt it like that!"

Maybe snakes don't feel pain as we do—I have no idea; I only know that this one showed all the signs of disliking the lip-sewing operation as much as any human being would.

Mahmad quietly continued till he completed the job, bit off the cotton and put back the needle. Then holding the snake up for all to see, he explained with great patience: "This I must do. You see, the others had taken the snake from the box—it might have killed somebody. I did not want that, so I must sew up the mouth of the snake," and he tucked it back in the box in a neat little coil.

* * * *

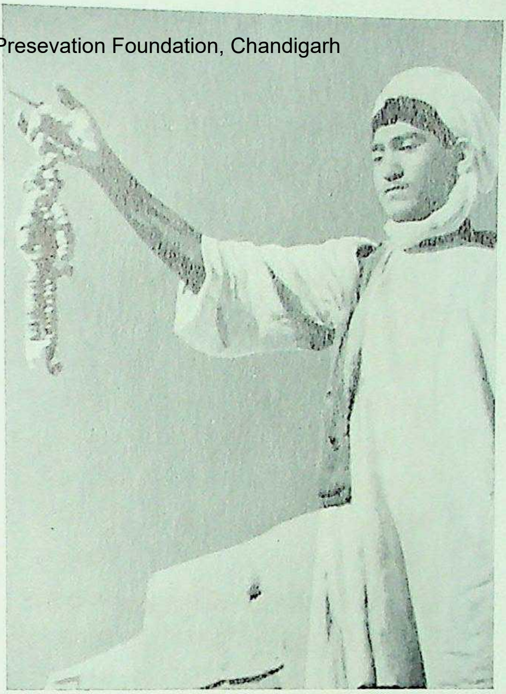
Jean-Marie and I were still hoping to get a ride on one of the local horses, but the next *Juma* decided me to wait till I got back to my own Bugti horse and my comfortable saddle. Khairullah, helpful as ever, appeared in camp that morning riding a mean-looking grey with a high, wooden saddle tied together with a piece of string; the harness had seen better days—or rather, years, to judge from its appearance; it seemed to consist of pieces of scarlet wool, very frayed, worn string and crumbling, ancient leather. Khairullah jumped down, fastened the ragged rein to a large stone outside the mess, and waited to see the fun. Jean-Marie rushed to change and in the meantime, the two dogs tumbled out of the mess, barking and snapping at the horse's heels, delighted at this new form of entertainment.

Seconds later the horse, rearing up wildly, had broken the apology for a rein and was galloping down the valley with Khairullah in full chase. Through Jean-Marie's binoculars we watched the chase for more than half an hour; the horse veering crazily, circled Mound A, then headed away towards the river bed, Khairullah, his thin legs flailing, showing an entirely unexpected turn of speed and stamina. Jean-Marie followed the trail of dust left by the two of them as it wove an erratic path through Mundigak village and away into the tangle of hills towards the Pass of the Black Rocks.

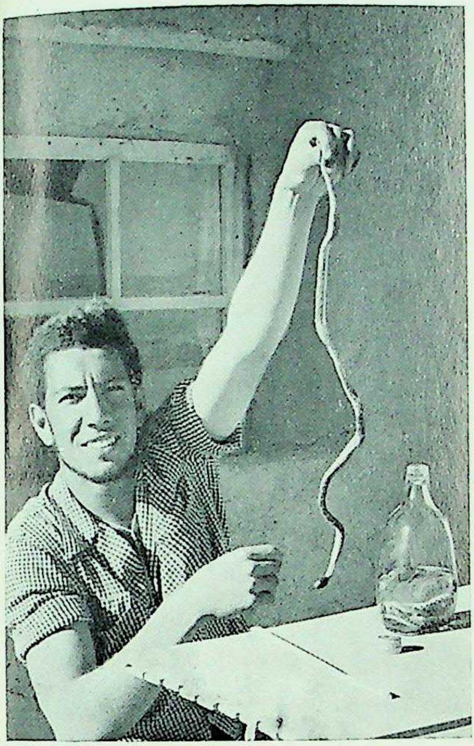
It was forty-five minutes before a puffing Khairullah, triumphant and dusty, rode into camp on a remarkably subdued-looking nag. After a trial jog—and jog was the operative word—down the valley and round the mounds, bumping in the hard saddle with its odd pieces of metal sticking into me in the most tender places, the thick metal stirrups, perilous reins and the customary single-foot, I circled back to camp and happily handed over to Jean-Marie.

"All yours," I told him—no doubt about it, I was getting to the stage where I put personal comfort high on my list of priorities in the art of living. Nonchalantly, Jean-Marie mounted and rode off towards Black Stone Pass. He disappeared from view, not to reappear for over an hour.

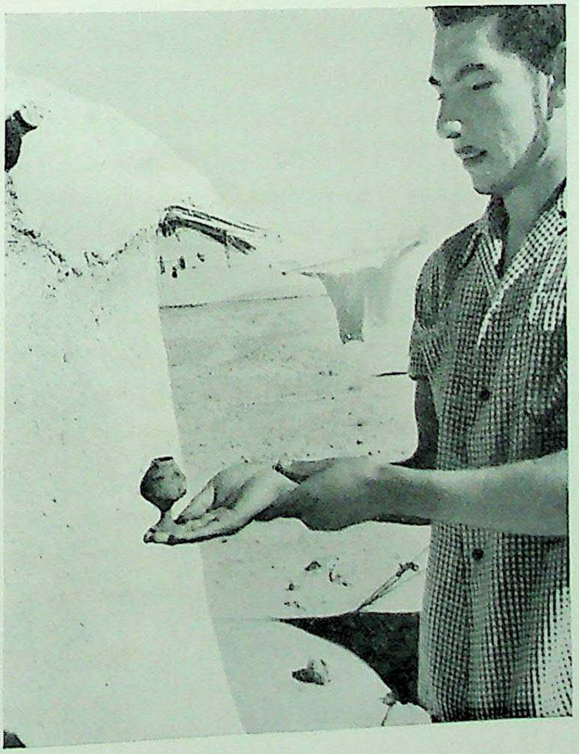
It seemed to me that Jean-Marie would surely need medical attention, or at least, first aid, after his long spell of rough-riding—I was a bit sore myself after only a brief trot round the dig. But Jean-

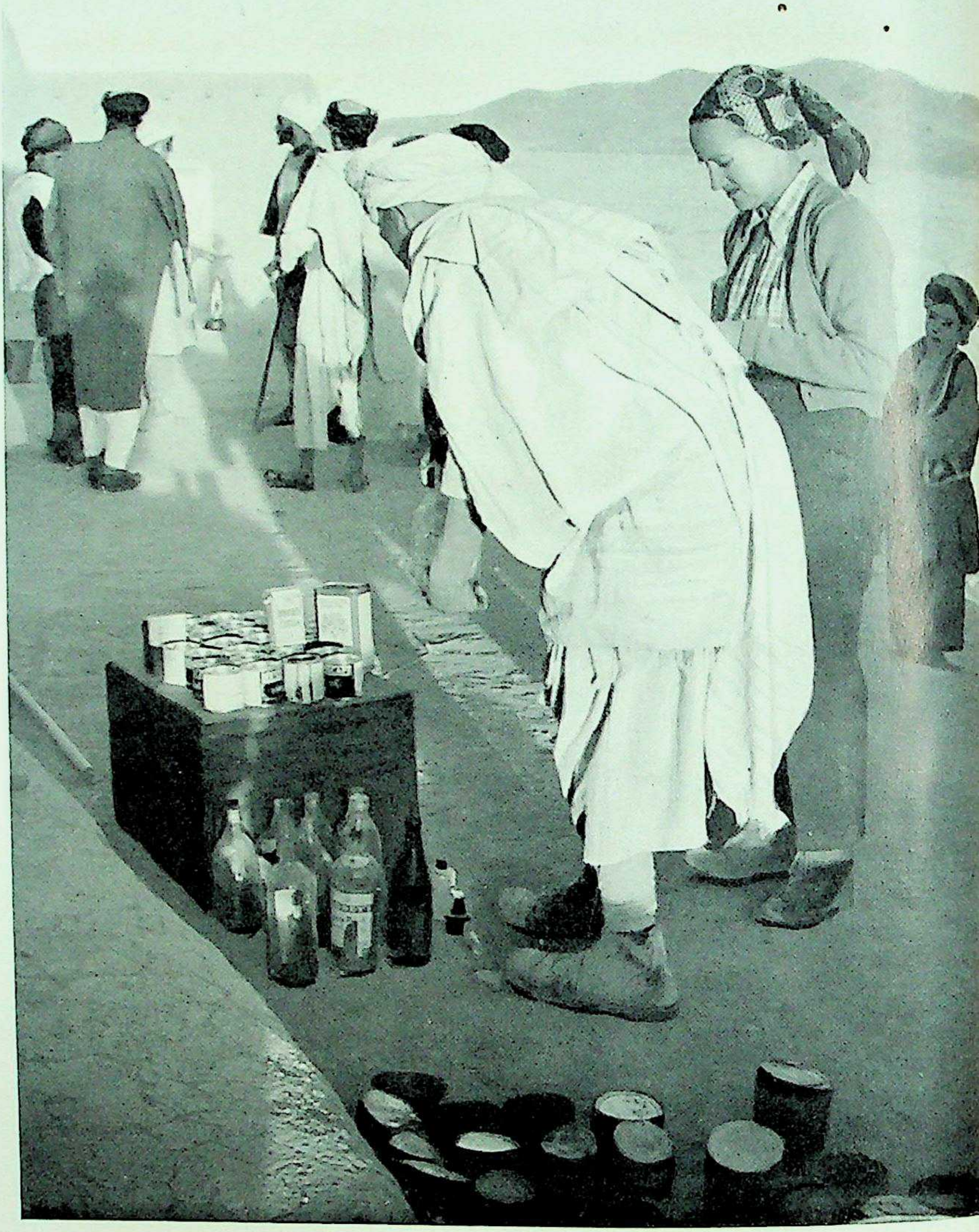


*Above:* Mashuk holds up a *Nawakee*, a doll made of dried apricots. This one is now in London's Horniman Museum. (See page 249.)



*Above* and *right:* Achour's activities were varied. Among other things he caught snakes and tarantulas and bottled them for the Pasteur Institute. One Friday, with the washline in the background, he held pottery for me to photograph. Here he holds one of the smallest "brandy balloons" with the peepul leaf decoration which was associated with the people of the colonnaded monument.





Damaged implements, empty tins and bottles, all were carefully kept to be used as *baksheesh*, the traditional perquisite of the East. Each man chose his own and was at pains to select whatever he thought would be most useful in his home. Here Madame Casal is superintending choice of *baksheesh*.

Marie was tough—nearly as tough as the tribesmen themselves, who would come to the camp for medical attention only after everything else had failed and they were practically at death's door.

* * * *

One day the four mullahs of Aroorkh strolled by my site with elaborate casualness and then turned back, as if an idea had just occurred to them. After the usual formalities—"Peace be upon you. Are you well, happy? May you never be tired, hungry . . ." one of them squatted by my side and at a prod from a fellow mullah, held out a roughly bandaged hand.

I unwrapped the filthy rag and exposed a suppurating wound on the back of his hand. I tried not to flinch at the sight—I was never very brave about other peoples' wounds, in spite of my wartime nursing—somehow one can do things in a war that one can never do in normal, peacetime circumstances. Nowadays I always tucked into my bag a small bottle of Dettol and some healing, antiseptic cream in a tube. As I cleaned the wound and spread the cream, I asked how and when this had happened. How? Oh, in a fire—he gave no more details. When? Maybe one week ago, maybe two or three weeks—who could tell? *Insha'allah*, the wound would heal in time—but, of course, there was no harm in trying a little of the foreign magic.

Another morning I was walking down from the main camp to my site when I stopped to stare in delight at the sight of a perfectly circular rainbow framing the whole of my dig, a soft mist of fine rain giving it a fairy-tale transparency against a dramatic fringe of grey-black storm clouds along the horizon. From this enchanted scene the most terrifying sounds of battle were rising. From where I stood I could see nothing out of the ordinary so, forgetting the rainbow and the dreamy view, I ran down the slope and up the other side to look down into the deep, wide, main excavation where Jean-Marie was making a tentative attempt to trace more of the "altar". He was standing up now, listening with scarcely-concealed impatience to a tearful youth who was clutching one arm while he babbled incoherently. All I could catch was Sirdar's name—Sirdar himself was nowhere in sight.

The boy was another Amanullah, but unlike most of the men on Mound G, he came from Aroorkh village. There was strong rivalry between the various villages in the valley and the men of Sheerga and Mundigak would gang up on those from the other end of the valley.

It was not until Ebrahim came across from Mound A, to sort out the argument, that I discovered what it was all about. This was intended to be the final season so Jean-Marie had not brought much new equipment this year, making do wherever possible with what was already in use. Many of the metal bowls, carelessly dropped and banged about, had split or become holed and of those that remained, several began to disappear—which we could ill afford this year. Each man was given two bowls at the beginning of the day, and was responsible for returning two in the evening. The previous evening it seemed that one bowl was missing from my dig and nobody would admit to being the guilty party. This was understandable because the men used them only one at a time, taking away a filled bowl, emptying it on the dump, returning to place it ready for refilling and meanwhile to pick up a full bowl. In their usual dreamy fashion they would often walk down the slope, throw the bowl upside down on the ground, then without picking it up, walk on to a hollow to answer the call of nature. When they came back, as often as not they would stop to chat, be spotted by one of the supervisors and guiltily run up the mound, forgetting all about the bowl. As likely as not in the meantime, someone else had walked by unseeing, emptied his own bowl on top and thus another *tukri* was lost.

This is what must have happened the previous evening when the wretched Amanullah (no relation to the "Mouse" brothers), had found himself minus a bowl at the final night check.

This morning everyone had been set to searching yesterday's discarded soil, poking with sticks and scuffling with shoes, but not a sign of the bowl. It was at this juncture, when they had gone back to work on the heavy soil, that Sirdar, in his usual impetuous manner, had accused the boy from Aroorkh of having deliberately stolen the bowl and taken it home with him.

At once the whole thing became a question of village honour. In his turn, Amanullah accused Sirdar of being the thief and, hot with anger, Sirdar had picked up the long-handled shovel lying near by, and without a thought, struck the boy on the arm.

Luckily for both of them, the shovel was an old one and the handle, already weak where it joined the metal spade broke off and did nothing more than inflict severe bruises on Amanullah's arm: otherwise he would have been lucky to get away with no more than a broken arm. On top of all this the whole gang, knowing the fines imposed for wilfully breaking tools, had conspired to rush the spade back to the tool-house, hoping it would be mended before Jean-Marie found out about it. They reckoned without Amanullah however, and now he stood, tears streaming down his baby face, while a sullen Sirdar shifted from one foot to another and muttered darkly that Amanullah was unworthy of attention—no man would cry, he was obviously just a girl.

Jean-Marie shut them both up by sternly imposing a fine of twenty Afghanis on Sirdar for having broken the shovel—"but it was already nearly broken," protested Sirdar indignantly—and five Afghanis on Amanullah for provoking the quarrel. Then to avoid further tension, Amanullah was given the rest of the day off and told to work on Mound A in future.

That was not the end of the affair by any means and for weeks afterwards I would come across little knots of men discussing the rights of the case and the justice of the fines. Sirdar, with glum face, was depressed at the prospect of the heavy fine—nearly two days' pay—but even more so at the news that Amanullah had consulted the mullahs of Aroorkh and threatened to have Sirdar arrested for assault. Since he had already been in gaol once before (chained by hands and feet as he graphically demonstrated, without food—the normal practice in Afghan prisons—and fed by the charity of his friends and relatives) this was not a prospect he found enchanting.

At least half the men on the dig, including Abdul Aziz and little Njamtullah, youngest of the "Mouse" brothers, claimed to have spent some time in prison.

"Do Afghan women go to prison too?" I asked.

Sirdar laughed. "Yes, but not in Kar Karez; they must go to the big prison in Kandahar. They go when they have done something violent like killing their husbands. They spend their time making clothes for the Army."

I remembered watching, on my last visit to Kandahar, a group of women prisoners walking along the street, shepherded by a couple of soldiers. Most of the women looked rather subdued, walking with their faces covered, but two girls, cheeky, beautiful and bold, strode along proudly, heads held high, eyes flirting with passers-by, bold as brass and quite undaunted by their situation.

* * * *

It was Akram who decided to see how I would look in a turban. He removed Ramazan's black *languatta* from his head and bound it round mine. I was subjected to "oohs" and "aahs" of admiration—at least, I hoped it was admiration—and Ramazan recorded the occasion with my camera—his shaky hand and the angle at which he held the camera produced a blurred, drunken ghost, but it was probably as good a likeness as any and the sight of the turban on me provoked exaggerated respect and calls of "*Sahib*" or "*Agha*" and a great show of obedience and mock fear.

"You look very good, you must always wear a *languatta*," Akram assurred me, head on one side, appraisingly. "Now we will call you Gwul Ali and you will be a real Afghan." There was a brief spell of ostentatious diligence coupled with sidelong glances at my get-up, and a unanimous declaration that this must be my working dress in future. Daily, Sirdar would assure me that my tunic was almost ready—his mother and sisters were embroidering the neck at this very moment. "Only one more day, *Khanum Sahib*, and it will be ready for you, the best in the whole of Kar Karez." So I asked Mad Amin to buy me a black silk *languatta* next time he went into Kandahar.

* * * *

A thin, high-pitched falsetto would announce the approach of Akram's "girl friend", a bucolic youth called Ali Ullah, wearing a necklace of yellow beads, with one earring of gold threaded with blue and white beads adorning the right ear, a chain bracelet that he would twist nervously round and round his left wrist, and an irritating, high-pitched giggle. On special occasions, after much persuasion, Ali Ullah would perform a quite-graceful dance using a sheet or turban as a veil, twisting and turning with dainty steps to the rhythmic handclapping of onlookers; but more often than not I found his giggle and habit of touching me on the arm to whisper confidentially, "woman to woman", irritating in the extreme. He was known as "*kam kam khanum*" (the "partial woman") and I had to admit that when it came to the domestic chores on the dig, sweeping the floor levels, cleaning house generally, "*kam kam khanum*" was far and away the most efficient.

Ali Ullah was in great demand too as a barber, and one day I came back from the lunchtime break to find him bending solicitously over Pyzullah, another of Akram's Hazara favourites, shaving his entire skull with a wicked-looking cut-throat razor. Behind him, Abdul Kayoum had stripped off his shirt and was enjoying a lovely splashy bath in a bucket of water which he had heated on the little bush fire round which the men gathered at the midday break. When the barbering had been finished to Ali Ullah's satisfaction it was his turn to sit down and have his tonsured head shaven clean, revealing many lumps and bumps and one really frighteningly thin patch of flesh beneath which I could clearly see the veins throbbing and pulsating. Maybe here was the cause of his half-and-half personality?

In the midst of our super efforts on the dig, more guests arrived, a French-Alsatian couple who taught school in Kabul and who had been to Mundigak during the first seasons. Now they were anxious to have a final look at the dig before going home on leave. Ginette rushed into Kandahar to buy mattresses for them, and Ramazan, looking up from his position on bended knees where he was scraping away at the floors, greeted them as old friends with a radiant *bonjour* as they inquired about his progress. Our guests were lucky because for the few days of their visit we enjoyed a break in the cold, wet weather; the sun shone, the camp dried out and we were able to wash our "smalls" knowing that they would dry in the sun in a few moments.

It was only now, with the presence of rather conventional Europeans on the dig, that I realized fully just how informal were the Casals. The first morning I went in to breakfast and joined the others as usual. A few moments later the guests trotted down the hill and into the mess room.

Solemnly walking from one to another as we sat at table, they shook hands, wished us good day and inquired after our health. I was under the impression that they were about to take their leave, but no—this happened half a dozen times a day, no matter how many times we had met before, at meals, in the camp, on the dig, always there were handshakes and greetings—and I had imagined that the English were the greatest handshakers in the world!

In actual fact the newcomers stayed only a few days, and after they left I inherited one of the cotton mattresses they had used. What bliss to have a soft and thick mattress, and enough warm clothes on top of me! I had been utterly ignorant of the fact that you could have a mattress like this made for a few Afghanis—about £1—in Kandahar, and it had not occurred to anyone on the dig to tell me. Why indeed should it?

* * * *

One day Mad Amin drove in from Kandahar with an enormous, stout beam lashed to the sides of the truck. The tree trunk was so thick and so long that there didn't seem any place in camp where it could profitably be used, but Mad Amin knew what he was doing. The rain was pelting down again. Despite this, half a dozen willing hands grasped the tree trunk and managed to manoeuvre it into the large mess hut of which the roof had been weakened by the continuous rain. Jacques meanwhile had scooped out a hole in the mud floor and with a good deal of ingenuity, now directed the beam into place supporting a major joist across the ceiling.

We ourselves were having headaches enough just now—so many walls and everyone with their own ideas about which should be left and which destroyed. It was no easy task before destroying a wall to decide which of two built facing and touching each other, both being whitewashed, was the earlier.

The few days of sunshine had given me a chance to press ahead. Jean-Marie was nearing the end on Mound A, and he had enlisted the services of Mad Amin and the truck which he would back up to the edge of the dig where the surplus earth could be shovelled directly into it, then driven away and shovelled out to fill up particularly muddy hollows that had appeared in and around the camp. This operation released more men for work on my site and now Ginette and Jean-Marie both took over sections of the Mound. Sirdar's donkeys were joined by a small, fuzzy foal that trotted all day long at their heels. Little Ali Gwul's donkeys were brought over too, and with this increased labour force we were beginning to get down to the more interesting levels. For the first time we began to uncover some small finds and my spirits rose as I thought of those crowded shelves in the *Maison des Antiquités*, so expectantly empty on our arrival, now displaying a few trophies from Mound G among the pots, beads, seals and figurines from all the other sites.

I had just discovered another new hearth in Room 1 (the very first of the Mound, once an isolated cell and now just one of a huge complex). This hearth was only a few inches below a very good flooring we had been trampling on for many weeks. Digging here involved a species of acrobatics on my part, with my toes curled into the shelf of sand, my elbows wedged a little farther and my hands working at shoulder level. The sight of that first small, plain drinking vessel with its narrow lip and delicate waist, standing upright in the side of the wall, inches from the hearth, was more than compensation for an awkward working position.

It was followed by three more goblets, all set around the hearth as though left there carefully by some housewife, ready for the family to use. All four were unbroken and in perfect condition, all similar to those found by Ginette round the marble table on Mound B.

At this juncture I had to move to another part of the dig to follow the course of a good terracotta drain running from one large room and emptying into what proved to be a small lane dividing my big complex from an apparently earlier, fortified building constructed on a different axis and surrounded by large, irregular bastions with huge stone foundations. It was in one of these large rooms bounding the lane that we found part of a bronze seal—as always, it seemed that the most interesting finds came just as the dig was finishing for the season.

At long, long last some kind of pattern was emerging. Oh, for just a few more weeks of sunshine hot enough to dry out the strange features we had been forced to abandon in the earlier stages! Jacques was to be seen daily tramping over the dig carrying his theodolite and followed by a slender, smiling Baluch youth carrying the surveying poles and collapsible table. From Jacques' patiently-drawn plans it would be possible to find some kind of order in this seeming tangle of buildings, but those plans would not be ready for weeks yet.

It seemed that our dearest hopes were doomed to disappointment. No sooner had our guests departed for Kabul than the weather turned cold and dull. Then one dawn I emerged from my hut as usual and was walking across to the washhouse when a glance to the west held me riveted to the spot. The mountains behind the camp were covered with snow, sparkling, glowing in the rays of the rising sun like some fantastic peach melba.

"There has never been snow so near to Mundigak at this time of the year," gasped Sirdar later in the day.

Lovely, tantalizing, coldly aloof, the snow was still clinging to the peaks and it spelt the end of our hopes of finishing work at Mundigak this season—it spelt the end of my dreams of finding the key to the mystery of Mound G.

Snow on the mountain peaks was strange enough for Mundigak, but snow on the ground—that was unheard of in the lifetime of even the oldest inhabitant. Yet that is what we experienced that autumn of 1957 in Mundigak.

It had been raining again, not just a drizzle, but a steady, heavy, relentless downpour that we had come to dread. Outside the cabins you stepped into a lake; inside was a depressing gloom and dampness. The kittens ventured out puzzled and dismayed by this cold, wet world, and ran back in fright as their paws sank into the muddy mess. However hard we battled, soaking and cold in the rain, it was impossible to carry on work. Under uniformly grey skies we ran the few yards from our cabins to the mess to sit looking glumly out at Mound A half-hidden by a veil of grey rain—the rest of the dig was completely invisible. An occasional bowed figure concealed in a felt cloak would trudge by on some errand from one of the villages or to bring us milk or fruit. The firewood was wet and the big stove in the mess had to be used sparingly in the evenings only to conserve what little fuel we still had. Each precious hour that might and should have been spent uncovering just a little more of the dig was washed away.

Occasionally there would appear a faint lifting in the cloud, the sky would be a little less grey and the downpour would slacken off. We would venture out to examine our various sites and look gloomily at the waterlogged trenches. Great lumps of red-and-white plaster had fallen from the once spectacular walls on Mound G. With the greatest difficulty we managed to wash out the most essential of our dirty clothes; the bath-house and our cabins were perpetually filled with the strong smell of wet wool.

It was in this depressing period that one Friday morning a bedraggled figure splashed through the mud to ask us to Sheerga for the evening. Ramazan had promised to try to gather more musicians together before we left Mundigak so that I could record their songs. It was not an inviting evening to be sure, but I jumped at the chance. None of the others was anxious to venture out, so that night, after we had finished supper, lugging my tape recorder with me I clambered into the truck with Mad Amin, Ebrahim and the cook.

The headlights wove an unsteady yellow path through what was now a drizzle, and a cold wind off the mountains constrained us all to huddle inside our warmest garments. Somehow, slithering and skidding over the track, we reached Sheerga—not the Sheerga I knew, where Mashuk and Sirdar lived, but a sister village a few miles farther on. We paused at the first Sheerga to pick up Mashuk and Bismullah and then plunged on into the thick darkness. At last we paused tentatively and dim figures loomed out of the blackness, darted into the headlights and guided Mad Amin to an angle between high mud walls.

Mashuk and Bismullah leapt off the truck and in a bunch we followed down the narrow lane. It was completely moonless, the stars hidden by clouds. I had a somewhat useless torch with a dim bulb; its tiny circle of orange light served only to emphasize the Stygian dark. The narrow lane twisted between what seemed enormously high blank walls. Nimble as a mountain goat, Ramazan went on ahead, jumping from side to side of the lane, hugging the walls and stepping on mud-slippery stones projecting from the repulsive pools of slimy water topped with floating refuse that filled the channel in the middle of the lanes.

Behind me someone was carrying the tape recorder, in front Ramazan holding a hurricane lamp bobbed deftly round corners and along seemingly endless alleyways. At one point he left the road murmuring something about "too much water", and climbed up the side of a house on to the flat roof—quite literally! Clambering blindly, covered with mud, we followed him, then skipped from roof to roof, round the beehive domes and down again into the lanes, across narrow, slippery mud bridges and finally up a flight of wet, mud steps to a thick, wooden door in a high, mud wall.

Breathless, confused, completely lost, we Indian-filed through the door into a small garden. By torchlight and the dim lantern I picked my way between dripping trees and flower beds to a patch of pale-yellow light diffused through smoke that streamed from a low, open doorway at the end of the garden.

The doorway seemed to be full of men and the smell of wet sheep-skins and damp clothes. Everyone was trying to take off muddy boots at the same time and to leave them in the small enclosed space just inside the door. It was only later when my eyes had adjusted themselves to the light, that I could see this enclosed space was a hearth with a mud curb, ashes in the middle, but no fire inside, placed, just as were so many on the "dig", so that the smoke could find its way out through the doorway.

The house was a very superior type known as a *kumbatta*, with a long, low room roofed in a barrel-vaulted fashion with burnt bricks; striped *glams* rugs were spread on the floor, with one or two better quality rugs on top of them, all along the walls. It was a scene of utter confusion just now, newcomers piling in, seeking shelter from the rain and removing their muddy boots, and earlier arrivals smoking and chatting on the rugs by the walls, and in the centre of the room, apparently oblivious of the noise and hubbub around them, several pious guests who turned out to be mullahs saying their prayers on their small, neat prayer rugs.

Edging round the back of the mullahs I settled myself against some cushions right at the end of the room, and looked around.

About twenty-five men of all ages were jammed into a space about thirty feet by twelve. Apart from the rugs and three niches in the end wall containing various mysterious bundles and a stringed instrument called a *rebab*, the room was bare. Ramazan, an excited and proud host, had married little Ali Gwul's widowed mother; I had an idea that Ramazan had been related to the dead husband and in the Muslim fashion had accepted the responsibility for his kinsman's widow and her family.

The yellow light of two lanterns flickered on many Hazara faces with their slanting, Mongolian eyes, high cheekbones and straight, black hair. All the time, more and more newcomers pressed into the room until I could no longer see or count the faces in the darkest corners near the door, but there must have been at least fifty people present, including several who had made the long journey from Aroorkh on the other side of the camp.

While I opened up the tape recorder and placed the microphone in position, Akram, tallest and most senior of the Hazaras, spread a piece of sacking in front of me and then brought in dish after dish of food; curry with carrots, rice, *nan* bread and a kind of thick paste, new to me, that Ebrahim described as soup—all washed down with pale-green tea and pomegranate seeds, already peeled for us. Everyone else had apparently eaten much earlier, which was just as well, considering the lack of space, but Ramazan and Mashuk sat with Ebrahim and myself, and together we dipped our fingers into the dishes of spicy, hot food.

"Eat, Gwul Ali, eat," urged Ramazan, addressing me as an Afghan.

"We have just finished killing the meat to store for winter," explained Akram, "that is why we are having this feast today."

Afghan villagers do not make a habit of eating meat every day—for them it is a rare and expensive luxury.

While we were still eating, a group of men in the corner nearest me began to sing, and I started the tape recorder. Ali Gwul now stepped over and around the squatting guests to bring us a ewer of warm water and a copper basin, and we washed our hands without moving from our places; indeed, it was virtually impossible to move without setting up a ripple of reaction all round the room.

When the food had been cleared away, someone reached up for the *rebab* and the mullahs began testing their vocal cords. There was as much preparation as if a full-blown symphony orchestra were tuning up: Ramazan lifted a *dholak*, a small drum made by covering the large, round bottom of an earthenware vessel with stretched membrane, leaving the small neck open, and began to heat the skin over the oil lamp. The singers rinsed out their mouths and spat, there was much hawking of throats and tucking up of long, loose sleeves and then one man placed two small, handleless bowls called "*tali*" (it means "cup") before him and began to tap them with slender metal pins, producing a clear, tinkling accompaniment; another took the copper basin in which we had washed our hands, turned it upside down and used it as a drum.

Black shadows danced on brown walls, shining eyes, catching the light, stared curiously at me from the dark depths of the room and a tall, turquoise hookah, passed from hand to hand, provided an intermittent background of soothing bubbles. The mullahs sang solo or in chorus, to the accompaniment of *dholak, rebab, talis* and basin; Ramazan paused from time to time to heat the skin over his drum, his face in a dreamy trance; little Ali Gwul, the cheeky grin quite disappeared, rain-splashed and damp, bore at intervals a covered tray of fresh green tea. The tape recorder whirring softly, recording all the coughs, whispers, rustles, bangs and gurgles; the hoarse, tuneless voices of the mullahs chanting their *Nat* songs about the Prophet Mahommed; Khairullah's sweet solo singing of a new love song; thick smoke, rain beating on the roof, smell of bodies and wet garments . . . it made a lasting impression of a type of Afghan hospitality that I had never before experienced.

The company was entirely masculine; the women, having cooked the food, undoubtedly under great difficulties because of the rain, were now well out of the way in another building, and had it not been raining so heavily I would have joined them for a spell. How many times in past years had I joined in similar semi-secular semi-religious rejoicings at the final gathering of food for winter—harvest suppers held in a Church Hall, with a hymn and a prayer to begin and dances and general merrymaking to follow!

Our heads began to droop. Tomorrow was a working day, weather permitting. That meant getting up before dawn. It was time to say goodbye. Salaams and thanks and many smiles all round, a necklace which I had brought with me for Ramazan's wife was pressed into his hands as we parted, and then out into the rain and once again across the slippery, perilous rooftops, to step carefully over rivers of sewage running down the middle of the narrow lanes. As we drove back, peering through the darkness, discussing the evening happily, pausing at strategic points to let off passengers, the windscreen became more and more opaque until at length we were peering through sleet and splashing through long-dry channels that had turned to fast-flowing streams.

I picked my way through the icy sleet to my cabin and opened the door. A piteous, continuous miaow greeted me from some unseen corner, and with Mad Amin and Ebrahim I searched for Number One's hiding place. At last we saw his tiny, marmalade-coloured head and wide, amber eyes, staring from one of the roof beams. What a struggle to get him down! Sharp claws and vicious spitting greeted the men as they tried to reach the frightened kitten. In the end I had to clamber up myself to bring the animal down to the security of the bed before the struggles and miaows ceased and were followed by a tremendous demonstration of affection, unusual in this kitten. He followed me every moment of the time I tried to undress, rubbed against my legs as though I had been away for months, purred until I wondered what terrible misfortunes could have overtaken him during my absence.

Next day Jacqueline told me that as soon as they had all gone to bed, putting the kitten in my cabin, it had discovered my absence and begun to call wildly, obviously afraid of being left alone, and this wailing had been kept up, non-stop, until I returned. Any ideas I may have had of leaving Number One behind when I left Mundigak were now completely banished: but how was I to break the news to my husband, who always professed to hate cats, and whose Alsatian Maxie, had reigned unchallenged for seven years?

I decided it would be better not to say anything at all but just to arrive.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# *End of a Dream*

NEXT DAY THE sleet stopped but the entire camp was hidden in thick cloud. True, we were over four thousand feet above sea level, a fact I was apt to forget; the surrounding mountain peaks towered several thousand feet higher. On the dig that morning I had a job to see even as far as the next chamber, while the camp itself was completely lost in a silent, damp, cotton-wool world. The following day was even worse. A damp chill turned to rain and sleet, and after a couple of hours I was forced to do something I had never done before; my hands were so cold and frozen that I had to go back to the camp and beg a hot drink from the kitchen before I could carry on.

Jacqueline and Ginette were working in the mess, Jean-Marie in his cabin, and Jacques pored over his plans, while Ebrahim had gone to Kandahar. I felt sorry for myself, the only one condemned to the outer cold, but not long afterwards I had to give up altogether; even as we watched, disbelieving, snow began to fall, followed by hail and then cloud so thick and dense that even groping my way back to the camp was a test of my sense of direction.

To cheer us up, Ginette produced a trayful of hot toasted snacks from the kitchen; to depress us again, Jean-Marie prophesied gloomily that the Kishk-i-Nakhod Rud would begin to flow soon and if that happened, we might be cut off from Kandahar until the following spring! This really did cast a gloom over us. If we could have been working during that period, it might have been a different story, although personally I was anxious to spend what would be my first Christmas with my husband. The idea of staying here, cooped up in a damp, gloomy hut, with short supplies, unable even to work—that just did not bear contemplation.

It was decided that I should go into Kandahar with Ebrahim and make arrangements for my departure a week later. Just in case there was the chance of a quick trip to Herat—something I had set my heart on for a long time now—I packed an overnight bag and took my cameras, leaving the remainder of my luggage, plus the kitten, to be brought to Kandahar later. I said goodbyes all round and we set off in the usual downpour.

The Kishk-i-Nakhod Rud was flowing but still fordable; the bridge had broken down completely and we followed the directions of a bus driver who had just made a long detour across country. At last we reached Kandahar where we collected the mail. I visited the M-K Company and, after signing a form in which they disclaimed all responsibility for my safety, arranged to leave on the following Wednesday. Relieved, I telegraphed my husband, hoping he would be able to send a vehicle to meet me at Quetta, and then made for the Aryana Airways office.

"Sorry, all flights to Herat cancelled—the airstrip is flooded, there is snow—no telling when the next plane will go."

That was the end of that particular dream.

Wrapped in my gloomiest thoughts, for it seemed that everything had gone wrong this season—no trip to Herat, no chance of finishing the dig, no spectacular finds, a frightening, slow paralysis beginning to affect my left hand (no doubt purely psychological for it disappeared when I got to Baluchistan), my long-promised embroidered shirt not yet finished—wrapped, I repeat, in these dismal recollections, I nearly jumped through the roof of the station wagon when we reached the top of Black Stone Pass to be assailed by a sudden bursting of the heavens around us. It was by now quite dark, but the forked lightning played round the car so fiercely it seemed impossible we could escape being struck. With each flash the valley before us was lit up dramatically. At last even Mad Amin was forced to stop driving and wait for the blinding curtain of rain to lift.

The river was flowing fast, as we had feared, but to our amazement we got across with only our ankles wet. It was the smaller stream nearer the camp that nearly proved our undoing. With steep banks on either side it needed a good fast run to get across, an impossible feat in the slippery mud and black night. We stopped the car and got out to survey the route. From the camp, only half a mile away, lanterns suddenly bobbed in the blackness and voices announced the coming of help; with everyone pushing, guiding and advising, we made the home stretch.

The cosy little mess had never looked so good as, bedraggled, we all crowded in to dry off by the large stove, I to move back into the hut, undo my bedding roll and be purred over ecstatically by the kitten. To tell the truth, disappointment over the Herat trip was mingled with relief at not having abandoned the kitten, for there was no telling whether I could have got back on the expected date, and had I not what might have happened to kitten, baggage and my return to Baluchistan?

I trailed back to my cabin and got undressed, shivering in the cold —anyhow, I had a hot-water bottle to warm the bed.

Number One gave a flying leap from the table and landed on my chest as I was thinking black, faraway thoughts. I sat down with a sudden thud, and having sat, remained on the bed to pull off my boots. Gradually I became aware of a warmth—a wet warmth—spreading insiduously round my backside. I got up in a hurry—a wet patch on my behind and a bigger wet patch on the bed told their own story. I had sat on the hot water bottle and burst it! That was the final touch to a discouraging day—everyone had gone to bed, I had no more bedclothes, my bed was soaked.

I stripped the *charpoy*, wrapped myself in a towel and my quilted *chupan*, and hugging the kitten to me, turned out the lantern and waited for the next blow to fall.

* * * *

As if to confound us completely, the next day dawned hot and sunny. Even if this weather continued, the dig could not possibly dry out in time for more work and in any case, all but a handful of the men had been paid off. But at least it was possible to take some photographs, and this we did from all angles. Jean-Marie, Jacques and I tramped over neighbouring mounds, looking for more signs of bulwarks and bastions. We found them, Jacques nodding and rubbing his hands together in satisfaction as he looked across to the other points of the ramparts and saw how they all fitted together.

A handful of villagers were doing the last-minute jobs and old Mohammed Ali shuffled by carrying basket after basket of discarded sherds on his shoulders to dump them atop the now enormous crescent of unwanted potsherds. Presently the truck drove up with a load of earth from Mound A where the last of the lowest level houses were being finished off, and the earth was tipped over the sherds.

Jean-Marie, studying the aerial photos, had found a second cemetery way to the west—individual graves these and, moreover, linked with funeral pottery that matched with the period of building on Mound B . . . very exciting this for it was the first evidence of such burials. One of the workmen brought in a small vase that he claimed to have picked up from this site earlier on—it was well out of the way on one of many spurs that split up the foothills where the whole area degenerated into a mass of crevasses and twisting gullies.

A workman wielding his pick with vigour had hooked a human skull that, despite the pick hole, was in far better condition than any we had so far recovered with all our painfully slow brushing and blowing . . . life is like that on a dig. Even the sunny afternoon was tantalizing, for I caught a glimpse of a plane heading westward and told myself it was the Herat plane that I might have caught after all!

Ah well, I would have a few more days here and could go on working on my own site at the odd small jobs—and who knew what treasures those few extra days might not reveal?

Even that was not to be.

Next morning I woke to the ominous sound of rain beating on the roof, and sure enough, the sky was grey once more, the rain making a steady, monotonous drumming that looked and sounded as though it had set in for good.

Jean-Marie's face grew long.

"I think that you must go now if you are to be sure of getting out of Mundigak at all," he told me. "We cannot risk waiting until later as we had planned. I do not think this weather will improve now, and we may all be stranded here for weeks—even months."

Reluctantly I had to agree. Reluctantly I packed my things and made a tape-harness for Number One to wear.

"But you are not going to leave Number Two behind, surely?" asked Ginette, scandalized.

After his initial antagonism, Number One had become almost inseparable from Number Two. True, she showed more affection than he did; Number One would lie dozing in his basket and Number Two would snuggle in on top, licking his face and showing every sign of attention which he accepted with bored complacency. They would play hide-and-seek round the curtains and spend hours alternately scrapping and playing together.

"Poor Number One will be lonely without her, you must take them both," urged Ginette.

"But I'm already nervous at taking just one kitten; I don't think my husband will stand for two," I explained.

Ginette sighed. "We cannot take it either—already we have too many cats in Kabul, and the Dumarçays also, so the poor little thing will just have to go back to Sheerga. . . ."

How well Ginette knew the art of playing on one's feelings, how could I resist such an appeal? I made a second harness and tied both together: it took the kittens five seconds to wriggle out!

A message was sent through the rain to Sirdar, and back came the incomplete shirt wrapped up in a piece of scarlet cloth—not merely unfinished as far as embroidery went, the whole thing was in about a dozen pieces.

At last I was standing in the pouring rain, loading up the wagon with my luggage: bedding roll, *rezai*, cases and a basket with two kittens!

Amid urgent cries for me to hurry as the river was rising, hurry, hurry or we too would be caught amidstream and drowned, like the passengers on a pilgrim bus last year, we got off with a rush, my last glimpse of Mundigak being Jean-Marie's tall figure peering anxiously through the driving rain towards the danger-point of the river bed.

The journey which normally took only two hours was to take more than twice as long; we had almost to swim across the river and the rest of the road was one long series of diversions. Bad enough at the best of times, now it was a question of driving completely across country in the hope of finding a way round flooded rivers and broken bridges.

The kittens fought, escaped from their basket, shivered, fell in the flooded floor of the car, miaowed, were terrified and sick, thus managing to keep my mind off anything other than getting them intact to Kandahar, until they were too exhausted to do more than doze and to utter an occasional pathetic moan.

The sight and sound of the remorseless rain thudding down on deserted, grey villages, and a muddy waterscape all round brought to mind the Flood with unpleasant force.

If the latest calculations based on Sir Leonard Woolley's excavations at Ur were correct, then the Flood had taken place about 3,200 B.C.—the first inhabitants of Mundigak probably began to build their houses soon after the flood waters had subsided. By the time Abraham was born, about 2,160 B.C., Mundigak had already passed the peak of its glory; it was probably about this time that the Aryan invaders had come from the north and attacked the people of the colonnaded monument.

During my two seasons' work at Mundigak, what had I really learned?

Thanks to Ginette and Jean-Marie I had now acquired some useful, first-hand experience of handling teams of Afghan workmen and excavating mud-pisé structures; but what else? Had my experience been two-dimensional only?

I think not. I had been digging backwards in time some five thousand years, and through a hundred tiny facets of the dead past I had caught a glimpse, however imperfect, of the men and women who had lived and loved and died at Mundigak two or three thousand years before the birth of Christ. I had been privileged also to penetrate into another dimension, perhaps even more deeply. My digging had not been confined to the physical and the past. It had uncovered the present too, the reality of life today and all that it means to the twentieth-century inhabitants of the valley of Kar Karez. Whether they came of the same racial stock as those ancient predecessors or from a much more recent race of invaders was really immaterial; the fact remained that Sirdar and his fellows had very little in common with their remote forebears; there were, of course, notable similarities such as the method of bread-making, of hanging doors, of games and homely pastimes. But much that was graceful and artistic seemed to have vanished with the original inhabitants of Mundigak.

The really striking discovery that I had made was the affinity between the tribesmen of this remote Afghan valley and the villagers of Britain! I had come to Mundigak with my head full of notions of wild, uncouth tribesmen and fanatical mullahs. Actually I had found charming, amiable, generous, curious and naïve peasantry rather less suspicious of strangers than is the average Cornishman. And the mullahs? They are said, and I believe this to be true, to hold considerable power, particularly in southern Afghanistan, where they have been known more than once to sway the politics and the destiny of the country and to have driven more than one ruler from his throne. But when it came to individuals and their reception of a Christian traveller, no one could have been more courteous, understanding and friendly.

It is not the contrast between peoples that amazes me the farther I travel from home, but the striking similarities and essential brotherhood of man, despite differences in politics and religion.

As for the dig itself, what was I to make of this last season?

Time alone would unravel the problems presented by the peculiar complex of buildings on Mound G, the huge, rectangular enclosure within thick mud-brick walls, with its series of courtyards and a score of small rooms opening out of each other, a number that was reduced as we dug into deeper levels, when two small rooms had often proved to have originally been one large one. Many of these rooms had hearths, ashes, burnt bricks, charcoal and burnt stones; the first good flooring had appeared in the big northern courtyard at a depth of about five feet. There had been many others on top of this, and there were more underneath. But there had been virtually no small finds. There were red painted doorways and white walls and at least one courtyard was connected with a series of rooms by a red doorway a full yard wide. Beneath the surface constructions the earlier levels had in many cases been damaged or destroyed by fire, like those on Mounds A and B. Lacking any domestic utensils and ornaments, Mound G presented a real puzzle. Had it been a *serai*, a super prehistoric hotel? Or possibly an army barracks? What was the strange structure we had called an altar? Jean-Marie told me later that he was convinced this was indeed an altar and there was no imagination about it. But where was the connexion between the uppermost cells and Mound A? Who were the people buried in the thirty-odd communal graves found between Mound A and the camp, not to mention the probably earlier graves in Jean-Marie's second cemetery? What was the significance of the strongly fortified building that still guarded the latest construction towards the dangerous north-east and the two passes to the wider, outside valleys?

Later, during a brief visit to England when I was enlarging some photographs in the Institute of Archaeology, the head of the Photographic Department provided another possible explanation. He was enlarging photographs of a Roman site, pointing out to his assistant the significance of the small, partitioned rooms, the bath in each room, the strategic situation of the whole between Forum, shops and Theatre—"It's a *Maison de Plaisir*," he was saying, when I looked again at the print in my developing tank. In my excitement I pressed a large hypo thumbprint on to the piece of Bromo.

"Could be," I said—"Mound G, close to the temple-palace, a bit farther from the respectable, residential area, near the soldiers in their fortified bastions—small cells, drains for the baths. . . ."

The more I thought about it the more aptly it seemed to apply. Had I spent two months excavating the Red Light area of ancient Mundigak? Surely, there would have been some kind of pottery, drinking vessels, cooking utensils? Maybe it was similar to the Phoenician temples at Byblos where every woman, whatever her family, was obliged to act at least once as a temple prostitute. Perhaps the occupants of Mundigak had held similar religious views and this had been a temple with individual cells for this very purpose?

If only we had had just a little more time, even a few more days of fine weather, we might have found something to prove one of our theories. We had found nothing in writing, unless you counted the geometrical designs of the steatite seals that might be some kind of cypher. We had found no coin and nothing at all to suggest that the people of Mundigak at any of their stages of progress had known the wheel.

The criterion of a civilized man is not necessarily his ability to fashion a cart or communicate his thoughts in writing, or even to exchange goods for money. Can anyone deny that the Incas reached a high peak of civilization, yet they never knew any one of these? Mules and llamas were better than wheels in a mountain kingdom, barter more practical than a coinage system and their complicated system of communicating ideas through messengers aided by a memory-string—a *quipa* made of coloured threads and knots—was easy to carry and confidential by nature.

There was no denying that we had all secretly hoped to find some form of writing at Mundigak, for even a few symbols in an unknown language would have helped to point the origin of the scribes; therefore every potsherd with a few scratches on it had come in for extra close scrutiny, just in case they were graphiti and not chance scars of the pick or shovel.

With a sudden jerk, we came to a full stop in the middle of a sloshy river bed between two towering mountain peaks. The kittens woke with frightened cries and I was brought back to the present grey deluge around me. It took us several hours and many excursions with pick and shovel, Mad Amin even standing knee deep in swirling grey water to pack mud and stones into a makeshift bridge, before we drove into Kandahar. Ebrahim had come with me to help get my exit permits, always a much more complicated process than entering the country. For the next hour or so I drove from Government office to Government office encountering wary looks and penetrating queries. Had I any relatives with me? What had I been doing all this time? Where was I going—and by what means?—all followed by slow deliberation, careful blowing on rubber stamps and impressing of seals on pieces of paper. It was a charming, bespectacled old gentleman whose office was a wooden table in a dark and draughty passageway built into the thickness of a defensive wall who finally handed me the all-important piece of paper.

For the next week the kittens and I lived in a large, gloomy hotel room which was either bitterly cold or, when the big stove was lit, choking with smoke. With wintry grey skies, darkness came early, but there were no curtains to draw across the tall windows looking out across the back of the hotel towards a side road and one of Kandahar's strangely weathered mountains, so I had to undress crouching behind the stove, away from curious spectators. The frugal fifteen-watt light, high in the ceiling, gave only a dim glow, far too faint to read by during the long, lonely evenings. The kittens cried, and whenever the door opened, rushed to escape down the long, dark corridors.

News from the M-K Company was not cheerful: the Arghandab River was in flood, the road to Quetta was cut and there was nothing to do but wait for the rain to stop. Morning after morning I would look out of the windows to try to see the mountains not a quarter of a mile away, and morning after morning they were hidden in clouds and driving rain.

Occasionally the rain would lessen, and then, locking the kittens in the room, I rushed down the town to shop, wearing ski boots, anorak and overtrousers—but nothing kept out the rain as I splashed, slithered and waded through the muddy lanes.

It was during one of these excursions that I heard a delighted shout of "*Khanum Sahib*!" and found Sirdar and Fazul sitting in a tiny open-fronted stall several feet above the level of the street, rain dripping down through the dilapidated roof.

From Sirdar I learnt that, after leaving me, Ebrahim and Mad Amin had got back as far as the river to find a deep, impassable torrent and had spent the night in the station wagon on the banks of the river.

"What are you doing now, *Khanum Sahib*? Why are you not away?"

I explained the situation and that I wanted to find an electric light bulb, a strong one, also a Thermos flask and someone to stitch together the tunic his mother had begun.

With one bound Sirdar joined me in the street and splashed ahead through the narrow alleys and into hidden courtyards. The Thermos

I found but did not buy—I was offered a small, broken flask for the equivalent of £3. The tunic I soon had stitched together by a man with a sewing machine on a little stall, and then came the search for a suitable piece of embroidery to be appliquèd on to the front in place of the unfinished work. This too we found and had stitched. Then the light bulb: an obliging shopkeeper unscrewed one from his display and sold it to me for 15s.

As soon as I got the lamp to the hotel and screwed it into the socket, it gave one dying orange flicker and went black. Plunged once more into gloom, afraid that maybe the truck would take off without me, wondering if anyone would meet me at Quetta and of how I could cope with the kittens. I had no one but the pleasant Afghan factotum from the M-K Company who occasionally put in an appearance to reassure me, to talk to.

"Isn't there anywhere else I can stay but this place?" I asked him. It looked horribly as though after all I was to spend Christmas alone in Kandahar and I recalled mention of an I.C.I. Rest House here. My Afghan friend agreed there was such a place—"but you have to pay in dollars and it is very expensive," he added dubiously.

Recklessly I brushed aside his objections. I had a small emergency fund of dollars that I carried in case I was stranded. The I.C.I. Rest House was not far from the hotel and as if to point the contrast between the two, the sun made its first appearance for days.

Yes, there was a room—or at least, a bed in a dormitory, and providing I had the dollars I could move in right away.

I needed no further invitation. Kittens and all, I ensconced myself on one of the five beds (luckily the two American girls who were staying overnight "just adored" kittens) and for the next few days enjoyed the luxury of warm, well-lit rooms and folk I could talk to. The sun continued to shine, but the waters of the Arghandab were still in flood from the mountain torrents and melting snow, and the Rest House was filled with preparations for Christmas. Trees sprouted in every corner, paper chains and tinsel adorned the pictures and there were glimpses of Father Christmas costumes when the children were out of the way. The kittens lost their nervousness and captivated everyone. I gave way to the pleas of one particularly importunate

American whose family lived at Girishk, and parted with Number Two. "She'll have a good home and the girls'll just go crazy over her," he assured me.

It was a wrench at the last to say goodbye to the small marmalade-coloured kitten; the pair had excited much comment and admiration for their unusual markings and colour. Part with Number One I could not. The rest of the journey would no doubt be difficult, but I would surely be able to manage. Days passed, my dollars were dwindling. Then the Casals and Dumarçays arrived in Kandahar.

"We thought we would have been trapped for the winter," they told me. As soon as the river had subsided sufficiently they had packed up and left while the going was still possible.

Now we were invited to join the Italian family who received our mail in sumptuous meals of spaghetti and roast quail and duck washed down with wine of their own making. There was the weekly dance in the big hall of the M-K camp, once the reception room of the Afghan nobleman whose delightful country mansion this had been. Next night by way of contrast I sat in the same hall with a handful of others to watch a Billy Graham film and join in a pre-recorded Christmas service conducted, a few days before time, by a charming American who had flown from Kabul to make sure that this year at least, Kandahar Protestants would have a Christian service sometime near the right date.

The day for the trip to Quetta did dawn eventually.

When we reached the Arghandab—a wide and fast-flowing muddy river—we edged cautiously over the Irish Bridge which was hidden under a foot or more of water. A farmer driving his cattle across the submerged causeway suddenly met a caravan of camels; his bullocks panicked and lost their footing. Two of them fell into the swirling grey-brown waters to be washed rapidly downstream. As I watched them apprehensively, the driver turned to me.

"One of our trucks tried to get across a few days ago and was washed down-river—the folk ended up caught on that tree stump," and he pointed to a withered, gnarled trunk protruding from what appeared to be midstream. "Still, I think we'll make it this time," he added comfortingly.

We did make it. In Quetta I found that only the day before my husband had been there, with a plane to take me back home in a couple of hours. Alas, he had been forced to fly back without me, so once more I had to wait for messages to be relayed (there had been floods here too), until I could take my long-suffering kitten on the night train to Jacobabad and from there transfer at dawn to a Land-rover for the five hour drive to Sui.

Number One, renamed "Chini", soon wormed his way into the hearts of both Alsatian Maxie and her master and now as I watch the marmalade-coloured cat, sleeky, silky and self-assured, lapping water side by side with huge Maxie, my thoughts go back to Chini's homeland; the far-away village of Sheerga, the dig that provided me with such unforgettable experiences, the sunny days of the first season, the wet, snow and hail of the second; roughened skin, blistered and cracked hands and feet, aching back; the thrill of finding a painted wall and tracing a new flooring all by myself; old Mullah Adad Mama like a benevolent hobgoblin, with his toothless, cackling laugh; in his tatty, skimpy black turban and even tattier, ragged *chupan*, chopping down camelthorn bushes for the morning fire; the sight of a startled Sirdar tumbling down the steep slopes of Mound A, followed by his donkeys laden with earth, and the shouts of horror that turned to laughter when we saw that all were unharmed; the warm companionship and natural gaiety of the Afghan villagers; the foundations of what would surely be a close and life-long friendship with the charming French couple who had invited me to Mundigak; and the strange path that had led me indirectly to my new life among a much more primitive tribal people in Bugti territory.

Never again shall I return to Mundigak to see the graceful white colonnade topping the great mound, just a travesty of its original self, its buried secrets exposed by the archaeologists' labour. For all that I like to dream that one day I shall go back yet once more. Who knows but that chance may direct my toe to kick up that one vital clue that will make the pieces drop into place and write "finis" to one more chapter in archaeological history?

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